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FAILURE FRAME

I BECAME THE STRONGEST AND **ANNIHILATED EVERYTHING**

WITH LOW-LEVEL SPELLS

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EVE SPEED

TAKAO ITSUKI

“Hijin Takao—that’s my name.
I was summoned by the Goddess
Vicius of Alion as a hero from
another world. But I believe you
may already be aware of that.”

TAKAO HIJIRI



|| KIRIHARA TAKUTO ||

THE STUFF OF KINGS—
KIRIHARA

FAILURE FRAME

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WRITTEN BY
SHINOZAKI KAORU

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Seven Seas Entertainment

HAZURE WAKU NO [JOUTAI IJOU SUKIRU] DE SAIKYOU NI NATTA ORE
GA SUBETE WO JUURIN SURU MADE VOL. 4

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Illustrations by KWKM

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Prologue

SOGOU AYAKA PARRIED THE BLOW of Banewolf's sword, sending a heavy shockwave down her spear and into her arms. Even against a huge man such as Banewolf, she didn't feel overwhelmed—perhaps because of her stat modifiers.

But now comes the real test! There's no guarantee he's going to play fair. I have to read his next move, and—

"Wah?!" Ayaka was knocked back hard, crashing bottom-first to the ground.

H-he took my legs out from under me?! But I never even saw—

She looked up to see Suou Kayako standing over her, looking sheepish and guilty at what she'd just done. Banewolf patted his shoulder with the flat of his training sword.

"It's good that you're being careful, watching for what comes next...but you couldn't predict Suou would attack you from behind, eh?"

"I'm sorry..." said Kayako, lowering her head.

"Bwa ha ha!" Banewolf laughed dryly as he reached his hand down to Ayaka. "What are you apologizin' for? You were only doin' what I told you to, Suou-chan!"

Ayaka accepted his hand and he helped her back to her feet. A few moments earlier, she would have thought it impossible that her friend Suou Kayako would sweep her legs out from under her, but...

Should she really have been so sure?

He's trying to tell me that I should always account for the unexpected.

"You're trying to teach me not to discount any possibility?" she asked.

"Oho! I didn't even need to come out and say it plain, did I? Promising student as ever, ain't you, Sogou... Phew, I've worked up a thirst!" Banewolf said, grabbing a bottle of ale from the table.

"I wonder if alcohol intake during exercise is advisable..." cautioned Ayaka.

Banewolf ignored her and brought the drink to his lips. "Serious one, aren't you? Just like the chief, always complaining about something."

"You belong to the Monster Slayer Knights, don't you, Banewolf-san?" asked Ayaka.

"Call me Bane, it's shorter."

"Bane-san, do you belong to—"

"The knight stuff is just for show. It's important to Ulza that everyone sees me as some knight of the realm, y'see." He happily gulped down the rest of his drink before continuing. "The Monster Slayer King of Ulza's a sniveling coward...which lets me relax, living the good life most o' the time. But I've gotta fulfill my role every now and then, don't I? Show them I've still got what it takes when push comes to shove."

Banewolf turned to look at Sogou's group, pointing the tip of his sword toward them.

"How about we move on to your battle formation? There's strategy here...so let's put S-class Sogou-chan in the center, right? Let's get started."

"Excuse me, but why...?"

During the next break from training, Ayaka went to talk with Banewolf. Her gaze was on Kayako and the others as she wiped the sweat from her brow with a white cloth.

"Mmm?"

"Why did you offer to instruct us, Bane-san?"

"It's simple, ain't it? I just don't want you to die. The heroes from another world are our trump card against the Demon King's armies. If you guys kick the bucket, I gotta say goodbye to the easy life."

I guess teaching us is some sort of self-preservation.

"Look, they only called me out here because the Demon King's on the move, yeah? Geez, the root of all evil's a real pain in the neck," Banewolf grinned and stroked his beard. "...The Goddess did look a bit annoyed when I volunteered though, eh? I bet she had her reasons for shorting you an instructor, Sogou. Never can quite figure out what that

Goddess is thinking.”

He turned his eyes to Yasu’s group. Yasu Tomohiro was sitting cross-legged in a chair with his back to them, while the rest of them milled around idly nearby.

“I’d really like to start training that lot too, even just the basics...” said Banewolf, thinking back to their first day of training.



It happened on the first day of their training. Banewolf offered a handshake and Yasu brushed it away without a second thought.

“What’s with that high-and-mighty attitude?!” Yasu shouted, motioning again for Banewolf to leave. “Looking down on me, are you? Me, the ‘Hero of the Black Inferno?!’ They call you Dragonslayer?! Fool! I need no assistance from the likes of you! Nobody in my group does, either! Get that through your thick skull! Now begone!”

Banewolf just scratched his head and grinned back at him wryly before replying, “I didn’t mean to come off arrogant or nothing... I’m not too good at manners and formalities and all that, y’know—back in Ulza, they’re always chewin’ me out for it. Well, I’ll try to know my place in the future.”

Ayaka watched the exchange, thinking, He wasn’t upset by what Yasu said. He’s being an adult... There’s a lot I could learn from him.



And since Yasu had rejected Banewolf’s help, Ayaka now had ample opportunity to be his student.

Her Kisou style of ancient martial arts was well suited to real combat situations—but form alone though was not enough. Training was not the same as the battlefield, and Banewolf had plenty of experience with real fighting. He knew about life-or-death struggle, and he had many lessons on how to survive it. That’s likely what the Goddess meant when she talked about technique and the art of battle.

Ayaka looked to the rest of her group, who were wiping the sweat

from their foreheads. Survive... Yes. *All of us will survive this...*

Their training grounds were now divided in two, split by a high wall down the middle. Sogou Ayaka, Yasu Tomohiro, and Kirihara Takuto's groups were in one half, and in the other were Ikusaba Asagi's group and the Takao sisters.

There must be some reason they divided us up like this...

Kirihara's group clearly didn't think much of Asagi, and it seemed unlikely they would get along. Putting them together in the same training grounds was a recipe for trouble.

I can see why they split those groups up...but the Takao sisters? Does the Goddess not want me talking to them?

Hijiri had been the only other student to speak up against the Goddess. It would make sense to avoid putting two rebellious elements together.

Is that what she's planning? Come to think of it, Kirihara-kun and his group have been acting differently toward Hijiri-san too...

There was something restless about Kirihara's corner of the training grounds, something that didn't start just recently. It all began on the first day of their training together.



"Let me reintroduce myself," said the eldest brother on their first day of training with Kirihara Takuto's group. "The name's Agit of the Four Holy Elders. You're in charge of this group, right? Looking forward to working with you."

Kirihara was sitting on a bench in the center of the training grounds, his legs spread apart assertively, leaning forward on the hilt of his sword which was stuck point-first into the ground before him. Oyamada Shougo sat by his side, the rest of his group behind them.

"You... You lot strong?" Shougo asked.

"I figure so, yeah?" answered Agit.

"Stronger than those Elite Five, or whoever?"

"Never fought them before, so I couldn't say." Agit's expression

was gentle, but he looked down to see Kiri-hara glaring up at him.

“Focus. Give it some thought,” Kiri-hara said.

“Hmm? What do you mean, exactly?” asked Agit.

“You’re just another obstacle for us.”

“Obstacle...?”

Kiri-hara looked away and gave an exasperated sigh. “I hear stories about these heroic blood warriors. You one of them?”

“I guess I am, yeah.”

“Then at the end of the day, you’re lower than us heroes. Cut-rate. Defective.”

“Hmm, you don’t mince words, do you? That bites.”

“I also question the need to speak such harsh truths, but... In the future I won’t be able to restrain myself from surpassing you in every way.”

Agit looked back at his siblings. His sister, the older of the two, shrugged her shoulders. Kiri-hara placed his sword under his arm and tapped at the air in front of him with his index finger.

“A wall. Right in front of you, there’s a wall you can’t see. In other words, an obstacle which is going to stunt your growth... But—” Kiri-hara stretched out his arm. “Dragon-ic Buster.”

The golden beam of light streamed past the Four Holy Elders in an instant, followed by a sonic boom. The air swirled around them from the pressure wave, ruffling their hair before the light evaporated a short distance from the training ground wall. Kiri-hara’s unique skill was now level 3, and he had learned to control its power and range with startling precision.

“I’m the greatest S-class hero there is, and I’ve still got room to grow. To break through such obstacles... Understand now, second-rate heroes?” said Kiri-hara, his arm still stretched out toward them.

“I see. You mean to say that you heroes from another world are a level above us, right? Hmm, but you know...”

There was a sound, like the wind had been sliced in two. For a moment, everyone was frozen in place until Oyamada was the first to break the silence.

“Ah?! Y-you little... When did you get over there?! Is this a declaration of war or what?!”

A blade was pressed to Kirihara’s neck.

It was Agit’s.

The elder smiled weakly, ignoring Oyamada’s howls and bringing his face closer to Kirihara’s. “When there’s still this much of a power gap between us...are you sure that’s the attitude you want to take?”

Even though he’d been caught off-guard, Kirihara stayed expressionless and quiet. Finally, he turned his stare to Agit.

“These shallow displays of power are so childish. You’re one step short of complete irrelevance, you know? Ready for the fall. You do understand that, don’t you?”

Agit looked surprised. He withdrew his blade and pulled back.

“Hmm... Quite the balls you’ve got there, eh? I’m looking forward to training you more than I expected. You pass, Takuto Kirihara.”

“You’re that desperate to deny it?”

Agit grinned happily. “You’re funny, Kirihara.”

Ayaka’s heart was beating out of her chest at the sight.

The way he moved just now... I didn’t even see him draw his blade.

She felt she could see it now—the gap in their abilities that couldn’t be filled with experience points and stat modifiers alone. Just as the training grounds were beginning to settle back down...

“Arrogant bunch of kids we’ve got here, eh?!”

The eldest sister of the Four Holy Elders—her black ponytail swishing around behind her—put everyone on edge again. Abis Angun was taller than her brother and had a stronger build, with a face just as beautiful as his. Despite this, she radiated a nervous energy.

Abis lazily wore her ceremonial robes open at the chest—enough that it attracted a lot of attention. Whenever she walked, her breasts would sway as if they were ready to pop out at any moment. The boys were mesmerized by her.

I could never wear clothes like those... Never in a million years.

“Ki-ri-ha-raa-?” Abis bared her teeth aggressively as she stepped toward him. “What was that about shallow displays of power? You’re

firing off your freakin' skill to show off too, huh?"

Kirihara cracked his neck, unamused.

"You're way off mark. In my case, there was nothing shallow about it."

"Hmm? Then you won't mind if I come make sure now, will y—"

"Hey, hey, hey!" Oyamada interrupted, stepping in front of Abis. "I ain't lettin' you talk to Takuto like that and ignore me, got it? Who made you queen of the world anyway, huh, Captain Mammaries?! Listen here! We're high-level heroes, yeah? I don't know what the deal is with you Four Holey Smell-ders, but chill with the attitude! Got that? Don't let your head get bigger than your tits!"

Emboldened by Kirihara's cool composure, Oyamada kept going. "You think we gave a bad first impression or what? Once we smash that freakin' Demon King and his armies, I'm gonna come back here just to bully you! Got it?!"

Poke, poke, poke.

Oyamada's finger jabbed into Abis' chest, but she didn't react to it at all, instead baring her teeth at him and grinning wickedly. Her right hand moved to grab his index finger.

Poke, poke...snap!

"Gyaaahhh!"



"Sulking again like a little kid, are ya, Oyamada?" Abis gave him a mocking smile.

"...Shut up. I'll kill you."

"You say you'll kill people all the time, little man. That's s'posed to scare me?"

"Huh? One more word, and I'll use my freakin' unique skill to—"

"To embarrass yourself again?"

"Ugh..." Oyamada groaned and remembered what happened when he used his unique skill, right after she'd broken his finger. She dodged all of his attacks, then broke another finger for good measure.

When the Goddess Vicius learned of the incident, she only smiled and said, “Oh, I suppose that was inevitable.” It was considered a part of their training.

“You’re crazy! I’m gonna make you cry someday, hear me?”

“I’m sorry, what was that? Want me to break another one?”

Oyamada exhaled but didn’t move to attack—he couldn’t.

The difference in power between them was clear. The Four Holy Elders were strong—overwhelmingly so. Kirihara, on the other hand, was quietly training with Agit.

“You’re smarter than Oyamada, I see, Kirihara,” he said.

“I use what I can...take every last thing that my enemy has to offer. I haven’t forgotten you and your siblings’ unimaginative behavior, though. A day will come when I test you... Be prepared.”

“Hmm... Not gonna get bored with you and Oyamada around, are we?”

The door to the training grounds opened suddenly. Asagi’s group walked in, followed by the Takao sisters, the Sabre-Toothed Tigers, and finally...

“It appears your training is going as planned! Thank you ever so much.”

...the Goddess Vicius.

“So long as you can accomplish the goals I set forth, I leave the instruction up to you. I can hardly ignore method and practice, but what is most important are results. I can’t possibly complain if you give me results now, can I? They are the only reliable measure, one might say.”

“To what do we owe this visit, Vicius?” asked Agit.

Ayaka wondered the same. Since the Goddess had gathered all the heroes from the other half of the training grounds, it must be something important.

“Right now, I’m having you all develop practical combat skills as a matter of urgency... But of course, you need to continue leveling up as well.” She placed a hand on her cheek and sighed. “But alas...Alion’s ruins are all but spent. There are only a few golden-eyed monsters left to be killed in the dungeons. That simply won’t do.”

Kirihara directed the point of his training sword at the Goddess.
“Finally time to start touring the other countries’ ruins then?”

“With the Demon King’s armies on the move, I’m afraid we don’t have time for leisurely field trips. We shall set out tomorrow...” said the Goddess, bringing her hands together and smiling widely, “...for the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters.”

Chapter 1: The Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters

WE SOON FOUND OURSELVES surrounded by the trees and the forest spread out before us as we looked down from the hilltop. The early morning breeze felt cool and fresh on my skin. From time to time, we heard cries in the distance.

Monsters, perhaps? I strained my eyes and saw the sky through the leaves above.

“I don’t sense any monsters nearby,” said Eve from up front, carefully listening out.

Okay. None of them are closing in on us yet. Until then, we’ll have a relaxing walk in the woods.

Eve took the lead in our party, followed by Piggymaru and me, then Lis behind us, with Seras in the rear.

“You guys have been here before, haven’t you?” I asked Eve and Lis.

“We didn’t last long, though,” Eve replied.

Even if it was just a short while, Eve had experience in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters—that was still an advantage.

“I can only guide you to the place we visited before, but there was a source of water there. They call it the Great Ruins for a reason and we can shelter in the old buildings.”

“What about food?” I asked.

“Some of the golden-eyed monsters’ flesh is filled with poison—but not all of them. You can never tell if the thing is going to kill you until you’ve already started digesting it.”

Apparently, there’s no odor or taste to the poison. We’d have to be starving to risk eating that stuff. The monsters in the Ruins of Disposal were so acidic I could barely even touch them...

“There are some fruits and mushrooms around here that are safe to eat. I’m not sure about the deeper areas, though.”

“Well, I’m sure we’ll find something,” I said.

We have my leather pouch, right? It's easy to carry, we don't need to worry about the food going bad, and it's always going to be safe to eat. This thing is going to make a world of difference in this forest.

"So the main reason you ran from this place was...?"

"The monsters."

So that's the bottleneck, eh? As long as we can solve the monster problem, we'll be able to make progress.

I turned back to look at Lis behind me, who was shouldering a large backpack. Eve had explained that bringing the horses with us would be difficult. It would attract the monsters' attention and cause the animals too much stress to be of any use to us. We had to carry our things on our own, and Lis had the heaviest load. Before we entered the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters, she said that she wanted to carry as much as possible.

"You doing all right, Lis?" I asked.

"I'm fine, Mr. Too-ka!"

"Just say something if you get tired, okay?"

"Yes!"

"I want to respect your offer, Lis, but you see..." started Eve, and Seras and I were about to add our concerns as well, but Lis shut us all down.

"The fewer bags you all have to carry, the higher the chance is that I will survive. I cannot help you fight, so if you can all move more freely, then it will make me safer in the end."

She's not wrong.

"You're a fine member of our mercenary band, Lis," I said as I looked back at her.

She beamed. "Ah! Th-thank you!"

"Aren't you scared?"

"I-I'm okay. Please, don't worry about me."

She's a little nervous, but I don't see any real fear. Is it because she's been here before with Eve?

"Th-this is strange of me to say, but the time I spent in that tavern w-was...much scarier than the time I spent here with Big Sister," said

Lis a little dejectedly. "If I'm with Big Sister, it doesn't matter where we are, I'll be happy," she said finally, her eyes softening.

"Sorry, Lis. I was so stupid not to realize," said Eve.

"N-no! You don't need to apologize!"

"People like that tavern owner make it hard to notice anything's wrong," I said.

Lis didn't have any visible injuries—Seras confirmed that when they got changed together. She was mentally cornered more than anything else. Lis is the type to grin and bear it, thinking back on the happy times she spent with Eve. It's almost like Lis's kindness made all of it worse for her. It's so messed up—someone's kindness bringing them so much sadness.

I'm glad I got to finish off that tavern owner who caused her so much misery. Some people might think I did the wrong thing. It was selfish to kill her, even if she was an abuser. I just couldn't stand the thought of her living out the rest of her life there in Monroy as if nothing had ever happened. That's why I sent that tavern owner to hell—I have no regrets about it.

"It's not good to beat yourself up over it, Eve," I said.

"Hmph..."

"Right now, you're the only thing that's saving Lis. She's only here because you decided to escape Monroy with her. You were the one who made that decision—that's more than enough."

Eve exhaled, shaking her head from side to side. "All right. You win, Too-ka."

We stopped in the forest for Eve to check the map on her wrist. The distance between the two dots was closing.

"It appears we're approaching our destination," said Seras, leaning in for a closer look. "But it isn't clear whether or not we can simply go straight toward it."

"No details on this map thing after all." I turned away from Seras and looked off into the trees. "Depending on the terrain, we might have to make some detours..."

Seras started to speak, but I put a hand over her mouth to stop her.

"Nh, mh...?"

Eve and I traded glances, and she nodded silently before drawing

her sword. She noticed it too.

“There’s a monster nearby. We stick to the plan,” I told her with my eyes.

She nodded once more, and focused her attention on the deep brush nearby, sword at the ready. Seras and Lis seemed to have noticed something was happening, and crouched down a little.

I pointed my arm toward the presence, and my mouth naturally began to twist into a smile.

I wonder what kind of monsters live here? Come out, then!

A scaled monster on two legs came leaping from the brush toward us—some sort of lizardman. I could see its double-pronged tail trailing behind it, with what looked like blades at each tip.

It’s different from the ones in the Ruins of Disposal...

There was a strange seaweed-like mass writhing upright where the lizard’s head should have been, as if the creature was completely submerged in water.

Hmm? ...A seaweed-headed lizard? My mind started racing through memories.

Eve gripped her sword tightly and shouted, “It’s a golden-eyed monster! What should we do, Too-ka?”

There were several golden pearls attached to the strands of seaweed atop the creature’s head.

I see, those must be its eyes.

Eve showed no signs of being afraid, and I was used to all these weird forms of monsters after my time in the Ruins of Disposal.

This isn’t enough to scare me anymore.

“Aghuuhn!” The monster twisted its neck around and let out a coarse cry. It was focused on Eve.

I wonder how it views leopardmen like Eve? I don’t even know the difference between leopardmen and monsters myself yet...

Eve moved first, but the monster stamped at the ground in response.

“Gygyooh!” It lunged for Eve, letting out unsettling cries. The monster’s over-developed claws swiped through the air, barely missing

her head as she ducked beneath its attack. Immediately, it thrust the two prongs of its tail toward her like javelins, but Eve's deft swordplay deflected them both. She moved easily, never breaking a sweat. She was the strongest bloodsport warrior in the world and was well deserving of the title.

...All right.

"Paralyze."

The monster stopped in its tracks.

"Works on the monsters here too, eh?" I revealed myself, walking out from the brush with my arm still outstretched. "Poison."

"Nghh?!"

I continued to step closer and placed my hand on Eve's shoulder. "Great work."

"Did you learn what you wanted, Too-ka?"

"Yeah, that's my first condition cleared."

My Paralyze and Poison skills both worked. Still not sure if they'll work on all the monsters in here, but this is a good start.

"Sleep."

The monster fell forward and collapsed onto the ground.

Sleep works too. I could finish it off with my berserk skill, but I have something else to check first.

"I'm going to check how long it takes for this thing to die," I said.

"I could probably take a creature like this down on my own. How does this thing look to you?" asked Eve, inspecting the dying monster.

I hadn't used paralyze right away so that I could watch it fight Eve and compare the lizardman to the monsters I'd fought before.

"This was weaker," I noted.

"Hmph?" Eve grunted.

"It was quite a lot weaker than the monsters I killed in the Ruins of Disposal."

In terms of speed, presence and battle instincts, the monsters I had fought in the past were far stronger. As far as aggression went, it was about as murderous as all the others, even if it was less capable. The

moment it recognized Eve as prey, it launched into an attack without hesitating.

That said, it is the only one I've seen so far. I'll have to observe more of them to see if they have the same behavior patterns.

"Well, in any case... The theory that all the monsters in this whole area are insanely strong is out, for now."

After a time, the monster died of its poison. I drew the shortsword from my belt and drove the blade into its body.

It went in with a single thrust! Way softer than the monsters from the Ruins of Disposal. No acidic liquid or anything either—not even the blood looks dangerous.

I looked into the creature's crazed, golden eyes.

"These things aren't a threat—not yet."

I switched my shortsword into my other hand and got to work on the corpse.

"Sir Too-ka, what are you doing?" asked Seras. She had both hands behind her back and was leaning in close to watch. She repressed her smile and averted her eyes from mine, always making sure I wasn't busy before calling out to me so as not to get in my way.

She's being standoffish. It's like there's a line that exists between us.

"I feel like I remember seeing this kind of monster before is all," I said.

"You've seen them before?" she asked.

"Well, this is my first time seeing one in person." I showed her the cover of my book as I took it out of my backpack. "But somewhere in this book..."

I leafed through my copy of *Forbidden Arts: Complete Works* until Seras pointed out a drawing in the bottom right corner.

"Is this it?" she asked.

It was a simple sketch of a humanoid lizard, with some kind of algae in place of the head.

"That's the one." The name came rushing back to me as soon as I saw the creature—the seaweed-headed lizard. "Apparently this leafy bit can be used to make forbidden items."

“Like the voice-change crystal you have in your fly mask?”

“Yeah, like that.”

Seras moved in closer, trying to read the script in the margins. Her head ducked in, until it was right below my face. “Hmm? It says that they live in some ruins in Bakoss?”

“That probably just means the guy who wrote this book didn’t come across any of them here.”

Apparently the Great Sage didn’t know everything about the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters.

I found an annotation on another page.

“The Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters is speculated to have rapidly changing monster populations. It would take monthly surveys to determine which monsters were living in which areas at any given time. While the ruins in each of the countries on the continent have mostly consistent populations of monster species, the creatures in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters can vary wildly in type and distribution. On the other hand, this means that all the necessary materials for forbidden items can, in theory, be collected there.”

That’s an important thing to know—monster hides and horns can be turned into valuable goods. The Forbidden Witch, experience points, and item materials... If I’m lucky, I could kill three birds with one stone here.

Seras looked like she remembered something after reading the annotation along with me.

“I have heard rumors of the castles and fortresses which guard this area. It is sometimes said that they are not simply protecting their lands from the monsters, but actively hunting on the outskirts to raise capital for their nations.”

“If there are a lot of different species around and they never go too deep, this might just be the perfect hunting grounds,” I said.

From behind my ear, a light blue tentacle snuck out to peek at the book. Piggymaru was wriggling about, as if reading along with us.

“Squee.”

I don’t think this little guy actually understands the words. Probably

just imitating me.

I stroked the end of its tentacle. “We need to prioritize getting you more of that monster enhancement solution, eh?”

“Squee!”

“This *Forbidden Arts: Complete Works* is quite the interesting book...” Seras murmured. She had been curious about it for some time now.

“Want to read it?” I offered. I recalled that she once mentioned that she liked going through old texts.

Seras turned to look me in the eyes. “Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“So long as it’s just you. I trust my foster parents, but you’re a close second.”

She turned back to the book again, fidgeting softly with her ears as they turned cherry blossom pink.

“...Thank you.”

Everyone likes to feel special—and in this case I’m telling the truth. Besides, Seras would know if I’m lying anyway...

“Ah, allow me!” She stepped in and took a knee, deftly slicing the seaweed away from the monster’s body.

“You’re really good at that.”

“Heh heh, I’m honored to receive the compliment.” She neatly rolled up the seaweed into a cloth.

“Take this too, then,” I said, holding out the book.

Seras took it carefully with both hands and held it gently against her chest.

“I will... Thank you so much, Sir Too-ka.”

We continued on our way, encountering several new kinds of monster in our path. All had golden eyes and attacked us on sight.

I suppose there really are no peaceful monsters like Piggymaru in this place...

The monsters posed no real threat to us, and we dealt with them

much the same way we did the seaweed-headed lizard. My status effect skills hadn't failed against a single monster yet. I managed to gather more materials to turn into forbidden items too.

Even though I brought tools to make forbidden items along with me, it didn't look like I would be able to make anything with what I had on hand. It took many different kinds of materials to make an item, and a lot of time too.

If there were some place we could camp—a safe area to stay for a longer time. Nowhere looks promising yet, but someday I want to find a base of operations to harvest materials.

Further into the forest, Eve found a slab of stone we could use for shelter, and we decided to rest there a while. I found a rock to sit on and stared up at the sky above. There was an opening in the canopy, and the weather appeared to be holding.

“Doesn't look like we need to be worried about the rain,” I said.

Checking my pocket watch, I saw that it was just after two in the afternoon. I looked over at Seras and saw her turning the pages of the book I'd given her while munching on a biscuit.



Seras's bites are really small, huh... Like a squirrel.

Suddenly her eyebrows creased, and she started flipping through pages rapidly. Her hands stopped when she found the one she was looking for. I saw panic on her face.

What's wrong... She's turning pale...?

Eve and Lis were starting to look concerned now too. Seras's shoulders were trembling, her voice unsteady as she turned toward me.

"Sir Too-ka...wh-what is the meaning of this?" she asked.

I slapped myself on the forehead.

Oh man. I forgot to explain that page to her.

She was looking at the letter written in blood—the Great Sage's warning about the Soul Eater.

"Don't worry about that. I handled it."

But only the Soul Eater's story is over. What about the humanoid monsters—the ones like it? In this Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters, those are going to be the real test.

As we advanced through the forest, one thing became clear to me. "The monsters are getting stronger and stronger the deeper we go."

The variation in their strength is almost gone too—although most are still weak enough that Seras or Eve could handle them.

My status effect skills continued to be one hundred percent effective against all the monsters we encountered in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters, but we had yet to encounter any humanoid ones.

"—Hup!" I jumped from steppingstone to steppingstone across the river to the bank on the other side. Eve offered me her hand as I made the final leap. She had gone first and was waiting for the rest of us to cross. I thanked her, and let my backpack fall to the ground.

The water was a little cloudy and high from the passing rains we'd had that morning. After a little scouting, it turned out going around the river would be quite a detour, and there was no bridge to take us across. So we decided to ford the stream, using the stones to let us skip across.

“You next, Lis. Take care, some of those rocks are slippery,” I called out to her.

“O-okay... Mr. Too-ka!” she called back, looking down at the surface of the water as she crossed. She stretched out her shaking leg to the next steppingstone.

“Hmph... Too-ka, shouldn’t I have carried her across on my back?” growled Eve.

“She wants to do this herself. We should respect her decisions, right?” I replied.

“But what if she slips, and...”

“I-I’m okay!” came Lis’s voice from the river. She jumped to the next stone. “I can’t rely on you forever. I have t—”

Lis let out a cry as she slipped on the wet stone.

“Squee!” Piggymaru shot out a long, rope-like tentacle to steady her, and she regained her footing.

“Th-thank you, Piggymaru!”

“Squee. ♪”

“...A-and I’m sorry for the trouble.”

“Squ-uee!” The little slime bobbed from side to side, as if to say, “Don’t worry about it!”

Piggymaru’s been doing more of those movements recently, huh? Not just color-changing like it used to.

Eve relaxed her shoulders—she had clearly been ready to dive in.

“You had that safety net in place, didn’t you, Too-ka?” she muttered.

“Well, yeah.”

I had given instructions to Piggymaru ahead of time to catch Lis if it looked like she was in danger. She was light enough that the slime could pull her out of the water if necessary.

“If Lis says she wants to try to do something on her own, whenever possible, I want to let her,” I said.

Eve looked like she was holding a question back.

“You’re wondering why I care so much about Lis now, aren’t

you?”

“Hmph, it crossed my mind. You like children that much?”

“She reminds me of me, when I was a kid.”

Lis carefully made her way toward us across the stones, holding on to Piggymaru’s lifeline for support.

“You mean, back when you went into the tavern, that was... personal?”

“Yeah, it was. I did it for my own satisfaction. Much more than you know, Eve.”

“Hmph. It’s surprising to learn you have such a dark, cruel history.”

“I was saved eventually. But that doesn’t erase what happened.”

Eve pulled Lis up onto the riverbank and looked at us both side by side.

Has she noticed something different about us?

“Wh-what is the matter?” asked Lis.

“It’s nothing.”

“Be careful about people who answer ‘It’s nothing,’” I joked. “They usually have a lot to say.”

Lis looked over at Eve.

“Big Sister, is that true...? Is... Is it because I slipped on the stones...?”

“No. That’s not it at all,” said Eve firmly, looking at Lis, then at me and then back at Seras. With a very straightforward expression, she said, “I don’t hear many stories of mixed-race elf and human children... Even fewer high elf and human children. I was just thinking about what would happen if Too-ka and Seras were to have a child. You’re still too young to have that talk, though, Lis, but—”

Splash!

Seras missed her footing on a stone and came tumbling down into the water. Lis whipped around in panic and leaned out into the river.

“Miss Seras?!”

“...You sure you don’t need to dry off before we get going?” I asked Seras, handing her a cloth for her to dry her hair with.

“I’m so sorry. I got distracted, or rather I let my guard down. I’m ashamed to admit it,” she answered, looking down at her lap in embarrassment.

She probably got thrown off balance when Eve started talking about children. It surprised me too, out of the blue like that. Couldn’t she have come up with a better topic?

“We all thought you’d have no problems crossing,” said Eve. “I was so sure, it made me slow to react to your slip.”

Sometimes I can’t tell if this leopardman is real smart or real dense...

Piggymaru had been surprised to see her fall too. “Seras, of all people, fell into the river? Really?!” it seemed to say. The little slime pulled her out as fast as it could, but her clothes were already soaking wet.

“Achoo!” Seras sneezed.

“I don’t want you catching a cold. Put this on.” I took off the Great Sage’s robe and handed it to her.

“No, please. I’ll be fine,” she refused.

I pushed harder. From the look in her eyes and the tone of her voice, she wasn’t actually resisting, just trying to be polite. She was the type of person who wouldn’t accept help unless I insisted.

“Well, then... Thank you. Allow me to borrow it for a time,” she said. Seras wrapped the robe around her body, bringing the collar up to her neck and buried her nose in the fabric.

Is she smelling it?

“...It probably doesn’t smell so great,” I apologized.

“Ah, no that’s fine.”

“Hmmh, so you don’t mind as long as it smells like me?” I joked.

“That’s correct.”

“...Huh.” Well, I guess I can just take that as a compliment.



Eve led the way in front of us, with Lis following close behind her. Seras and I walked side by side, watching the forest pass us by.

The last time I checked my watch it was just after 2 o'clock, but the dense forest shut out most of the light even at this time of day. The deeper we went, the larger the tree trunks were, and thicker branches with wide leaves blotted out the sky.

These changes are a sign we're making progress, though—this is a good thing.

I turned to the high elf walking next to me to ask her some questions.

"Hey Seras, I want to know more about monsters. I've encountered double-faced leopardmen in the past, and... Well, they all had golden eyes," I said.

Seras looked over at Eve before answering.

"You want to know what the difference is between them and Eve—am I understanding you correctly?"

"Yeah."

"Golden-eyed monsters are said to originate from the source of all evil."

"So regular monsters like Piggymaru can't get turned into golden-eyed monsters?"

"I can't say it would be impossible, but as far as I know, no one has ever witnessed a native monster being transformed."

So golden-eyed monsters have always been that way. Then the monsters that have been on this continent all along are natives, and the golden-eyed monsters are born of the source of all evil.

"I don't think I've come across many native monsters, to be honest," I noted. I could count the number I'd seen on one hand—they seemed to be even rarer than golden-eyed monsters.

"Most of the native monsters live far away from human civilization. There was once a hero from another world who warned about the dangers of native monsters being turned into golden-eyed monsters, which led to a campaign to exterminate them. Most are living in hiding as a result," Seras explained.

"So once this source of all evil this is defeated, are all the golden-

eyed monsters under its control just going to disappear?” I asked.

“That doesn’t appear likely. I’ve heard of frenzied golden-eyed monsters who descend into confusion once their masters are killed. My apologies, I haven’t exactly answered your original question.”

Seras refocused her mind on the topic at hand. “The races which can understand human tongues, or which can be communicated with are known as ‘demi-humans’—they exist in a space somewhere between monsters and humans. Golden-eyed monsters that can understand human languages are known as demons. I have never seen one before, but it is said that they mostly serve the source of all evil.”

Hmm, so Eve isn’t treated like a monster because she can speak, then. The double-faced leopardmen from the Ruins of Disposal couldn’t speak, so they’re monsters.

“The majority of demi-humans also avoid contact with humans.”

“What category do elves fall into?”

“Under human laws, we are classified as demi-humans. Both elf and dark elf communities alike typically avoid contact with humans. That said, there are numerous clans of our race that have friendlier relationships with humans than many of the other demi-human races.”

I see... I think I understand a little more about how leopardmen and demi-humans are treated in this world, and why I haven’t seen so many of them walking around. And the only two I met in Monroy ended up leaving with me.

“Eh?” Eve stopped at the front of the line—something had alerted her and the fur on the back of her neck seemed to stand on end. “...Lis, turn back.”

“What?”

“They’ve found us.”

“B-big Sister?”

“Too-ka,” Eve called out to me.

I placed a hand on Seras’s shoulder and motioned for her to take care of Lis. She took Lis by the hand as I rushed toward Eve, whose sword was already drawn and ready.

“What is it?”

“It’s them.”

“You’ve seen these monsters before?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t beat them,” she apologized. Her tone was firm, but her breathing was rough. Simply knowing the nature of the enemy in front of her was enough for Eve to admit defeat.

She’s not even going to fight? That can’t be right... No, it’s precisely because she has faced these things before.

“All right, I understand the situation,” I told her.

Eve glared out into the trees, grinding her teeth at the darkness.

“We’ve no choice but to rely on your power to beat them,” she said.

Something was approaching at incredible speed—the sound of trees being ripped up root-and-branch from the earth was thundering closer and closer. Whatever they were, they were coming straight for us. From the noise alone, I could tell they were huge.

“These are the monsters that forced you and Lis to run,” I said, moving closer to Eve and placing a hand on her tense, muscular shoulder. “I’m right, aren’t I?”

She swallowed and gave a single shallow nod.

“Too-ka. Your orders?”

“I want you to fall back.”

“...Understood.” She positioned herself behind me without argument.

She said she couldn’t beat them. These are monsters not even the strongest bloodsport warrior could go toe to toe with. I suppose I could ask her to act as a decoy, but there’s the possibility she could get hurt, even seriously injured. Eve has those eyes that can see in the dark, and ears like radar sensors—we can’t afford to lose her or those unique talents of hers. I don’t have time to link up with Piggymaru, they’re almost upon us...

I hid behind a tree trunk and peeked out in the direction of the noise. I saw trees falling in the distance, and two immense shapes moving toward us. They were close enough to make out now—giant slugs—that’s the first thing their forms brought to mind. Great golden dragonfly eyes bulged from either side of their heads, and dragonfly mouths sat in the center of their faces. Several tentacles sprouted from

their backs like elephant trunks, and veined muscular human arms hung on either side of their bodies. Towering above me, they were even larger than the Soul Eater had been.

Elephant slugs—two of them. Are they humanoid types? No... That can't be right. Humanoid types would look more like people—that's what Seras told me at least. The Soul Eater fit the bill...but not these things.

"Nhuuhn! Bhooorhooo!" The creatures' strange battle cries filled the air in the forest. I heard the sound of birds taking flight, beating their wings hard to escape.

"I see." For a moment my joy overtook me, and I almost lost composure. "It's you."

The ground rumbled underneath the great creatures as they closed in on me.

Those things might be slugs, but they aren't slow by any means.

They bellowed as they rushed forward. The whole spectacle was absurd and off-putting—creatures such as that should never be able to move as swiftly as they did. It seemed that they used the great arms at their sides to propel themselves forward and change direction. Their great heads swung left and right, searching for us. I felt their joy, their murderous intent, and their pure excitement at finding new prey. They appeared not at all that perceptive, though—they had a wide line of sight but were unable to pinpoint our location until they'd already drawn into my range.

"Welcome. Paralyze."

"Hoh?! Orh...?!"

"Monsters that not even the strongest bloodsport warrior could go toe to toe with..." I snorted a laugh, emerging quietly from my hiding place behind the tree trunk. "But only because she fights fair."

I've never faced an enemy head-on before. Who cares about a fairness during a fight? About honor? Feints and ambushes are all fair game, as far I'm concerned.

"The hunter has become the prey."

The two defeated elephant slugs frozen next to each other looked like sheer cliff walls rising before me. Their murderous intent and joy had now turned to confusion and resentment.

“Hroohn!”

I stacked on all the effects I could, trying to level them up.

To finish this...

“Berserk.”

Crimson streaks spurted from the creatures’ bodies like hissing geysers of blood. A red rain began to fall upon the forest.

“Hoh, Ghoeee?!”

I stared at the two huge, pathetic beasts, both arms still outstretched.

“Sorry. I’m going to have to end this quickly.”

The more a target tried to struggle while paralyzed, the more damage they would take by moving. But the monsters were unable to restrain themselves—they couldn’t resist the influence of my Berserk skill. They soon collapsed into a pool of blood, defeated. The forest was quiet again.

Level up!

Level 1797 → Level 1798

Oh, I’ve leveled up. It’s not like every monster has to have a huge amount of EXP or anything, but every little helps. That restores all my MP, too.

I glanced over at Seras and Eve to make sure they were safe, and Eve came running to my side.

“Is it over, Too-ka?”

“Yeah.”

Her leopard eyes carefully inspected the monsters’ remains.

“You defeated these things without breaking a sweat... When we encountered them, it was all we could do just to run away. I’m more amazed by you every day.”

Being able to get away from those things was a feat in itself, to be honest.

“It wouldn’t have been easy to beat those things if you’d faced

them head on. These aren't humanoid types, are they?"

"No, but humanoid types aren't the only threats in this forest. There are plenty of other things to be afraid of."

"I know that—all too well," I sighed.

The monsters in the Ruins of Disposal are a good benchmark.

"Too-ka... Before you fought those things you said, 'It's you.' It was almost as if you've seen those creatures before."

She heard that, eh? Great hearing as always.

"These things are 'Nazorts,' I think."

I stepped into the pool of blood and lifted up one of the creature's human arms. There were soft semicircles of flesh on the monsters' hands, almost like the pads on the paws of a cat. I poked at the flesh to check it wasn't too hard and took the shortsword from my belt.

...All right, this should be possible.

"What are you doing?" asked Eve.

"I'm going to cut these bits off with my sword."

"You..." Eve recoiled at that. "D-don't tell me you're planning on eating them, are you? Th-they don't exactly look appetizing to me."

Seras walked over to us, leading Lis by the hand.

She giggled. "He isn't going to eat them, Eve. Right, Sir Too-ka?"

She must have read about this in the book I lent her.

"Nah, no plans on eating this stuff," I said. "This is one of the materials I need for Piggymaru's monster enhancement solution."

Hearing its name, the slime popped out of my robes and squeaked.

"Mhmm, I see. Hmph? But then..." Eve tilted her head, a look of confusion on her face.

"You're not going to put that stuff in your body, but... If it's for Piggymaru's monster enhancement solution, then—"

"Squee?"

"Piggymaru is going to have to eat that weird fleshy stuff?"

"...Squee?!"

The slime looked terrified.

Don't worry, Piggymaru, I'm sure the potion won't look this gross when it's done. Probably.

We finished gathering materials from the elephant slugs and continued on our journey. An hour later, it happened.

There was no warning.

“Wh-what...?”

We immediately put our backs together and looked out cautiously at the forest around us.

“Eve, what can you sense?” I asked.

“I'm not sure...”

“Seras?”

“N-nothing... I don't know what's happening.”

There's definitely a monster's presence somewhere nearby.

But it was nothing like Piggymaru's presence—the little slime was confused too.

There was something out there, something already close by, and had nearly caught us completely off guard.

What is it? What's happening? I can't sense any aggression or murderous intent like before...

It was unsettling not to feel that familiar presence. The threat was more like a strange, unknown pressure drifting over me.

...This isn't like any of the monsters I've encountered before.

“Where is it coming from?”

I scanned the forest, but only found trees as far as my eyes could see.

Even supposing the thing's hiding, I should be able to sense its direction if it's lurking nearby.

Seras readied her bow and scanned the sky. “...It isn't above us,” she said.

Not below us, either.

I expected a surprise attack from below at first, but there was no presence from under the earth.

No, this is different—

“It’s coming from...me?”

A noise—the heavy pressure of the creature’s felt like it was right on top of us.

“Squee!”

I heard Piggymaru squeak as I took off my backpack. The slime also sensed something, and the noise was coming from the backpack I’d been carrying. Eve readied her sword.

“It’s...in your backpack?” asked Eve, as she and Lis cautiously approached.

Seras looked to be preparing her spirit armor, a cold sweat forming on her brow.

“Ah!” I realized with a start and plunged my hand into the backpack. “Don’t tell me it’s...this?”

It crackled as I pulled it out and set it on the ground. I took a step back and called out to the others.

“Keep a close eye on it.”

Now this is starting to make sense... It was the thing in my backpack the whole time.

“Sir Too-ka, is this...?” Seras trailed off as she looked over at me.

“Yeah...” I murmured. It was the black egg I found in the Mils Ruins. “It’s hatching.”

Amidst all the tension and anticipation, the egg peeled open and something emerged.

“Pumpee...!”

I heard the creature’s cute voice as it came out of its broken shell

—

“It’s, um... It’s a horse?”

It looked like a horse. Or I guess a pony, since it was small?

No, I’ve seen ponies on the internet before. This is way smaller than those. Its eyes aren’t golden—at least that gives me one less thing to worry about.

The creature’s hair was white, and its eyes a dark brown. It looked

almost like a sports mascot, or a plush toy...

But it's definitely a tiny pony. But...how did it fit inside that egg a few moments ago?!

I put a hand to my mouth. Even if it was folded up, it was hard to imagine the pony had just come out of the small broken egg it left behind.

"Hey, Eve... I feel like that thing has gotten bigger after hatching..."

"Hmm, so you noticed it too."

It's not just my mind playing tricks on me.

The horse-like creature struggled to keep its balance, but eventually found its feet.

"Ponies aren't born from eggs around here, are they?" I asked.

"Not that I know of," answered Eve.

"So, this is a kind of monster then?" I asked Seras.

"I believe it would be classified as such," she replied.

"Do you know what this one's called?"

"I know of several horse-like monsters, but...none that match this description. It's possible that once fully grown I could identify it..."

The egg, with its swirls of white, red and black had looked unsettling. It was hard to imagine the adorable creature before us could have come out of there.

I'm not really sure what I expected.

The pony's eyes were fixed on me, round and innocent. I checked on Piggymaru inside my robes.

"Squee..."

No aggressive reaction... Piggymaru's leaving the decision up to me.

I felt no malice or murderous intent from the pony. At least that much was certain.

It's almost as if...

"Pumpee? Pyuuun..."

The pony waddled toward me. Seras tensed up, waiting for orders.

“Sir Too-ka...”

“It’s fine, Seras. I don’t think it wants to hurt me. I want to observe it a bit more. Only act if you’re completely sure it’s dangerous.”

The pony stopped in front of me, stretched out its neck and sniffed. It tilted its head to look in my face, and its eyes sparkled.

“Pumpyuun. ♪”

Lis stood next to me, her eyes twinkling just as brightly as the pony’s. “A pony...”

The pony moved in closer, rubbing its head against my leg.

“Pyuun... Pyuu. ♪”

I’m not exactly an expert on the sounds ponies are supposed to make... but do they all sound like this?

“When we entered this land, we left the horses behind because the stress and fear would eventually get to them. But...” Eve trailed off, deep in thought. She looked to me for an answer. “What should we do, Too-ka?”

“Something bothers me about this,” said Seras

“Hmm? What is it?”

“When we first found that egg, it was wrapped in a mysterious cloth. It was so unusually hard too... But where did it come from?”

There’s something about this monster.

I stroked the pony’s cheek.

“Pumpyuun. ♪” It squealed happily. Eve reached out to touch it next.

“Pumpyuun... Brrhh...” The pony backed away, raising its haunches and lowering its head. It was cautious of Eve, but didn’t seem angry—more scared than anything else.

Probably just shy, I guess? This guy was just born a few minutes ago though. Is it instinctual behavior? It probably imprints on the first person it sees, or something like that? I’ve heard of the phenomenon with baby chicks.

“Hmph? It doesn’t seem to like me. Does it fear me because I’m a leopard?” asked Eve.

“I’m not sure why yet, but it’ll probably get used to you, won’t it?”

I circled the pony and turned to stroking its back. It was soft; its hair felt smooth and fluffy as it ran through my fingers.

“Hmm?”

There’s something on the back of its neck.

I saw a translucent sphere, half buried in the back of the pony’s neck.

I think I know what this thing does, but... I should check with my knowledgeable elf first.

“Seras, do you know what this translucent sphere is?”

She approached slowly, watching the pony’s reactions to keep it from being scared.

“Pumpee?”

That’s interesting. It doesn’t seem to be as cautious of Seras as it was of Eve. I guess Seras has been with the egg ever since we discovered it. I wonder if how much time we’ve spent with the egg has anything to do with it.

“...Excuse me.” Seras placed both hands behind her back and craned her neck over for a closer look at the sphere.

“It’s possible that this is an organ for absorbing mana,” she said.

“You’re sure?”

“There are monsters with similar organs of which I am aware. They are not uncommon on magical creatures and beasts. It is said that such monsters can absorb large amounts of mana into their bodies.”

Like loading data into a server, I guess?

“You’re always so reliable in knowing this stuff. Thanks, Seras.”

“I’m honored that you have come to rely on me.” She placed a hand on her chest and looked down, showing her long eyelashes.

So then, did the pony get bigger after it hatched by absorbing mana with this thing? It fit inside that egg before it hatched...so I guess mana accelerates its growth?

That was something I wanted to test out.

“Could you give us some space? Except you, Piggymaru. Eve, watch the perimeter, will you?” I ordered.

“What are you planning to do?” she asked.

“I’m going to pour mana into this thing.”

Eve looked confused, so I explained my theory to her.

“Hmph... So, this monster can transform using mana, you think?”

I touched the sphere, and the pony turned its head back to look up at me.

“Pumpyuun?”

“Don’t want to do this?” I asked.

“Pumpee. ♪”

Doesn’t sound upset or negative... I think that sound was agreeable.

Perhaps it was because of my long-standing love of animals, or my experiences in the Ruins of Disposal—or maybe a mix of both—I was able to understand roughly what monsters were thinking.

“Status Open.” I checked my remaining mana.

How much is it going to take for something to happen, I wonder?

I began to pour, my mana slowly filling the sphere. It started to darken, filling from the bottom up, just as the crystals in the Ruins of Disposal and the gauge on my leather pouch did. Finally, the crystal was completely black.

“Pumpyuuun!”

Streams of what appeared to be black light enveloped the pony, covering it in darkness until only the silhouette remained. It began to morph and shift.

“That’s...” muttered Eve.

“Brrhhh...”

What stood before us now was a full-grown black horse, quite unlike the cute mascot-like exterior it once had. It was as large as the horses we’d left behind, and now sounded refined and masculine when it whinnied at us.

Still got those cute, round eyes though.

“Squuu!” Piggymaru sounded impressed and shocked at the same time.

“It’s amazing! The pony...” Lis had the same reaction.

Seras put her hand to her chin, studying the monster with deep

interest. "I see. So that's the power he has," she said to herself.

A horse, eh? We might be able to get him to carry some of our stuff. I still have some concerns, though... He might get spooked by the monsters we encounter around here. We'll have to make sure that won't happen first.

I checked my stat window. "Looks like it took around 1000 MP to transform you." I stretched out a hand to the monster's cheek, and he nuzzled up against it.

"Pakyuree. ♪"

Good. He still recognizes me... Doesn't seem confused or driven crazy by the transformation.

"Snort."

Hmm? Does it want something from me? It's back? Ah—he's pointing me to the sphere again. It's completely filled with black, but...

"...Wait. You want more?"

"Pakyuree." The black horse nodded then lowered his head to make it easier for me to reach up.

He seems to understand what I'm saying...

"All right then."

If this horse has some other hidden power, I want to find out about it sooner rather than later. It might be a strong trump card I can use later on. Then again, maybe this guy just likes the feeling of mana being poured into him.

"Here goes." I put my hands on the crystal and started pouring again. This time a spiderweb of red lines formed faintly on the sphere's surface, glowing with red light like veins under the glassy orb.

"Still need more?"

I checked my status screen and watched my MP continue to decrease. The first transformation had taken 1000 MP, but I had already poured close to 5000 more into the crystal now. The black horse still showed no further signs of change.

I'd rather not use over half my mana on this...

But as I reached the 10,000 MP mark, it finally happened. The horse reared up, red crackles of lightning dancing at its hooves. The lightning turned a deep crimson, and in a flash his body was cloaked in

scarlet and black light, intensifying as it coalesced.

“Snort... Snort!”

What stepped out of the light once it had faded had none of the cuteness of its previous incarnations. He was a huge, red-eyed beast with devilish horns on either side of its head, and possessed a muscular form with veins visible all over its body. As I watched its jet black mane sway gently in the breeze, I could hardly believe this creature had been born just minutes earlier.

What drew my attention most of all were his eight, powerful legs planted firmly on the forest floor. Its eyes were piercing and intelligent. I could see only reason there within—there was no madness. Rather, the horse seemed to look at me as its master, as if he owed me some level of loyalty.

The beast was divinely majestic and imposing. His black hair had an almost metallic green sheen to it.

“So, this is your true form...” I was unable to repress the twisted smile of joy spreading across my face. “You’re going to be quite an interesting addition to our party, aren’t you?”

Standing behind me, Seras and the others looked overwhelmed. Only Piggymaru was unfazed, poking out a little tentacle next to my ear.

The little guy must already know this horse doesn’t mean us harm.

“Sir Too-ka... Are you okay?” asked Seras cautiously.

The great black horse towered above me—it would’ve been hard to describe the situation as relaxing. Its size aside, the beast’s sharp red eyes were enough to intimidate anyone in its presence.

Makes sense that Seras, Eve, and Lis would be worried.

I reached out to the horse, and he narrowed its eyes and rubbed his cheek against the palm of my hand. Seras was awestruck.

“...That’s what horses do when they like somebody.”

“I think only his outer appearance has changed. And he might think I’m his parent or something.” I stroked the black horse’s nose. It closed its eyes and swung its great black tail back and forth.

I guess that feels good, huh?

“Mr. Too-ka...” Lis timidly spoke up next, already feeling

confident enough to speak. “What are you going to call him?”

I guess he does need a name. I'm going to be calling him to my side from now on, I suppose..

“A name, huh? Hmm?”

I looked at the others. “Can you think of any good names?”

“From what I have observed, this horse is quite attached to you. Shouldn't you be the one to decide?” suggested Seras.

Lis nodded in agreement. “That's what the horse wants.”

“I'm not great at picking names, but... Hmm, let me think...”

What about borrowing from those mythological horses...

I ran through the different fantasy creatures in my mind that resembled horses. Unicorns, Bicorns, Kelpies... Those are the most famous examples from mythology I knew.

I had learned about them from games and novels in the old world. It had two horns, so Bicorn wouldn't be far off... But when it came to eight-legged horses, there was one that came to mind right away—the mythical horse, Sleipnir. It was featured in Norse mythology, as the famous horse of Odin.

“How about Sleir?” I suggested, simply taking the first few letters of Sleipnir's name. I looked the horse in its red eyes and waited for a response.

“Whinny. ♪”

He swung his tail and Seras folded her arms slowly and smiled.

“I think he likes that name.” She walked over to Sleir, her hand outstretched. The horse accepted her hand readily.

“We'll be counting on you from now on, Sir Sleir... Ehh?!”

Sleir nuzzled past her hand and brought his nose to her neck.

“E-excuse me?!”

He sniffed her neck a couple of times, then went around her back and sniffed more, as if he was trying to lick her.

“S-Sir Sleir?! Ahem...I'd rather y-you didn't do that!”

Ignoring her protests, Sleir snuffled away as if trying to make sense of Seras by smell.

“Like I said—P-please, might I ask you to stop?” Seras looked to me, panic in her eyes.

“Sir Too-ka!”

Horses have a good sense of smell—I remember reading that somewhere. But why would he be so taken with Seras? Hmm? Could it be that...

“Maybe it’s your scent?” I suggested.

“M-my scent...?” Seras turned pale, trying to gently push Sleī’s nose away with her hands. “D-do I...really stink that much?”

“Nah, I think it’s the opposite.”

“The opposite? Ah, Sir Sleī! Not there!”

“I noticed it when we were riding together, but you don’t really have a strong smell to you.”

“D-do you think so? I can’t tell.”

“There is a distinct smell that’s definitely you, but I only know because I was clinging on to you as we rode. Sleī’s probably just checking you out like that because you don’t have a strong scent is all.”

“Then I suppose I can hardly blame Sir Sleī.” Seras relaxed, and let the horse have its way with her, but...

“W-wait-?!” Sleī licked Seras on the cheek. “Y-you’re going to get me covered in drool... Hyah!”

“I think he really likes you. By the way, Sleī... There’s something I want to confirm with you.”

Sleī looked at me, cocked his head on one side questioningly.

“Can you turn back?” I asked, miming shrinking the great horse with my hands.

“Whinny!”

Sleī brayed at me quietly, and her whole body was blanketed in light. The light grew stronger, until the horse was no longer visible—then disappeared as suddenly as it had come.

“Pumpee!”

There Sleī stood, back to his original small, white, mascot-like form. His sounds were now high-pitched and adorable again.

“So, if I pour mana into you again, you’ll turn back?”

“Pumpyuun. ♪” Sleil reared up on his two round hind legs and raised its hooves in the air as if celebrating.

“Here.” I held a clean cloth out in front of Seras’s face that I had dampened with some of our drinking water.

“Ah, thank you,” she said. Seras tried to take the cloth, but I didn’t hand it over.

“S-sir Too-ka?”

“I’ll wash you off. Unless you don’t want me to?”

Seras glanced at me with upturned, inquiring eyes. “...Do you mind?”

“Well... As a parent I’ve gotta take responsibility for the things Sleil does.”

She giggled. “Is Sir Sleil your child now?”

“I have to make sure my vice-captain doesn’t end up hating me for leaving messes, don’t I?”

“Well then, I shall accept your proposal.” Seras gave me an elegant smile and swept back her hair to expose her cheeks.

I stroked Seras’s white cheek with the cloth.

Not too hard. I have to be careful.

Sleil walked over to sniff at Eve and Lis—it looked like they were getting along.

Seems to be an agreeable horse—that’s a relief.

“So, what do you think of Sleil?” I asked.

“Well... I believe in the second stage of transformation, Sleil might be able to carry the majority of our luggage. It would lighten our load, and give us an advantage in combat perhaps,” replied Seras.

“That third stage of Sleil’s looked like it’d be fast—might come in handy one of these days...” I noted.

I want to test how strong Sleil is in combat eventually. He looks strong, but even that’s a mystery.

“We’ll find out sooner or later. When we encounter another monster I believe,” said Seras, looking at me somewhat anxiously.

“...You’re right.” I looked over at Sleii.

“I never imagined such an animal would come out of that little egg,” said Seras.

“I think we’re going to have to ask the Forbidden Witch about this too.”

“Yes, I think we will.”

I realized that talking to Seras allowed me to organize my thoughts—she was a good listener. My hands moved the cloth carefully across her smooth white skin.

“...Beautiful skin, eh?”

“Well, Sleii was only just born, you know.”

“No—I wasn’t talking about the horse.”

Seras looked away, her milky white cheek turning red.

“Could you... Please be clearer with who you are referring to?” She pouted, trying to hide her embarrassment. Seras went on to explain that elves have beautiful skin across the board, as the contracts they make with the spirits drive out all impurities from their bodies.

Must be nice to have the spirits take care of your skincare routine.

“But doing so takes time, it isn’t instantaneous. It couldn’t remove all this saliva from my skin quite as fast as I would like. I suppose I could simply dry myself with the spirit of wind, however...” She explained that this automatic skincare feature worked especially well for high elves.

That explains why her skin always looks so flawless.

“Right then, that should be enough,” I said as I wiped away the last fleck of Sleii’s spit.

“Thank you very much. That was... Actually, I rather didn’t mind it.”

“How about I ask Sleii to lick your face again sometime?” I joked.

“I-I don’t know about that...” She smiled uncomfortably “Perhaps every once in a while...”

Eh?!

After I was done cleaning Seras off, Eve walked over with a serious expression on her face.

“Hey Too-ka, listen.”

“Hmm?”

“I was looking at Sleii and noticed something.”

“What is it?”

“Sleii appears to be female.”

Huh, I thought the horns meant Sleii was male... Wait, that's it...?

Why was Eve so concerned over a thing like that?

“Squee!”

Now what?

I looked over to see Piggymaru and Sleii squaring off.

Wasn't Lis cuddling Piggymaru just a second ago?

“Pumpee!”

“Squee!”

“Pumpee...”

“Squuee...”

“Pumpee?”

“Squeee?”

“...”

“...”

“Pyuun.”

“Squ.”

“...Pumpyuun. ♪”

“...Squee. ♪”

“Pumpyuun!”

“Squee!”

To my surprise, Piggymaru leaped onto Sleii's back.

“Squee!”

“Pumpee!”

Sleii then started trotting toward us, Piggymaru sitting astride her. Seras watched them both, a relaxed smile on her lips.

“Hmph! Looks like they’re friends already!” I said.

After that, we transformed Sleil into her second form and loaded her up with our bags using some leather straps from Seras’s backpack.

That third form takes up too much mana, but the second is only 1000. This should be enough to carry our luggage in any case.

“You’re really good at this, aren’t you, Eve?” I ran my hands over the expertly secured straps which held our things in place.

“I have a lot of experience with traveling. Seras could do the same, I’d wager,” she replied.

I don’t have nearly enough experience with traveling yet—I need to learn more in the days and weeks to come. Seems like I’ll be relying on my partners for a long time yet, though.

“You have a unique and special power which only you can use,” replied Eve. “We rely on your strength, and cover for the things you can’t yet do in exchange. You don’t need to learn how to do everything on your own.”

“...Was it written all over my face?”

Eve gave a short, muffled laugh from the back of her throat. “This time, yeah.”

Does that mean I’m usually harder to read?

We proceeded deeper into the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters. The canopy of leaves grew thicker overhead, and sunbeams dwindled as we walked. We located a number of places that looked suitable to camp but passed them by.

If we don’t find any other good spots up ahead, we can always turn back. ...Still, that map of Eve’s is a lifesaver. No need to worry we’re going in the wrong direction. We can tell how close we’ve gotten to our goal too. It’d be really difficult to search for the Forbidden Witch without that thing.

Lis rode Sleil, who was carrying most of our bags.

She walked for so long carrying our luggage but at the end of the day, she’s just a child. She doesn’t have the stamina that we do, and I’m happy Sleil can carry her. Lis might refuse at first, but she’s a smart and preceptive kid. She knows when to give in and accept help, even if she does look to others to make sure it’s okay, first.

I quickened my pace to walk up next to Slel.

“Lis.”

“Ah, Mr. Too-ka.”

“Looking for the approval of others gets a bad rap, but it can also be useful. There are good things you’ll get out of it.”

“...Yes.” Lis smiled at me.

“But you shouldn’t hold back your own feelings all the time, either. When you have something on your mind, make sure to speak up. Don’t worry, I’ll take the time to listen. Got that?”

“Th-thank you for your kind words... I appreciate it, Mr. Too-ka.”

“And look after Eve too, won’t you?”

“Eh?”

“She can be pretty slow, y’know?”

“I can hear you, Too-ka,” came Eve’s voice. I turned and grinned at her.

“I know,” I said.

“Heh heh... Then I will look after Big Sister too,” laughed Lis.

“L-Lis...!” said Eve, her mouth open wide.

We continued encountering monsters as usual. We could have just finished them off with my status effect skills, but Eve had other plans.

“I want to fight these strong monsters, and hone my fighting abilities,” she said.

“Fighting against strong opponents is the best training there is—especially in battles when your life is on the line,” Seras agreed and said that she would like to fight too, so long as there was no great gap in strength between her and the enemy. “But I will leave the finishing blows to you, Sir Too-ka.”

“All right, then. Let’s do it.”

It’s advantageous for me if these two get as strong as possible. And if they ever look like they’re in trouble, I can just paralyze their opponents with my skills.

And so, Eve and Seras began to fight the monsters together,

working to coordinate as a team. Seras's movements were smooth and flawless, and she sliced apart her foes as if performing a graceful dance across the battlefield. Using every last drop of strength the spirits had given her, she lightly dodged the fierce attacks of the monsters before her. When the enemies were too strong, she used her spirit armor's defenses to face them down.

On the other hand, Eve was a berserker through and through and her movements were beastly, yet somehow refined. Compared to Seras's grace, Eve fought with utter ferocity. With each swing of her sword, she tore through the monsters' hides and ripped out grisly chunks of flesh from underneath. Her brawn, agility, reaction times, techniques, and primal instincts were unmatched. She was a true warrior, born to fight.

I could not have hoped for two stronger or more technically-skilled teachers to help me improve my own abilities. For three more days, we continued to fight our way through the forest as we drew closer to the Forbidden Witch's house.

We slipped out of the dark forest into a large clear area filled with wrecked buildings and scattered with rubble and debris. "Ruins" was the right word for the roofless walls that stood scattered about before us.

Guess it makes sense why they'd call this place the Great Ruins.

Still, should be good enough for a bit of cover. We might consider camping here tonight.

The area was flat, surrounded by large trees on all sides.

I don't sense any monsters nearby, but it wouldn't be difficult to spot us out here...

I sat down on a large chunk of crumbled wall, and Eve checked her map.

"We're getting quite close, aren't we?" I said.

"Hmph. I'd call this two-thirds of the way there."

Lis was watching Sleif eat grass near the trees. The addition of the black horse to our party had sped up our journey considerably.

Not to mention, she hasn't shown any sign that she's scared of the monsters here yet. Brave, maybe? Or perhaps the monsters are still too weak

to threaten her.

In any case, I was grateful to have that worry off my plate, even just for the time being. Seras bent forward, placing both hands on her knees and looking over at the map. Eve put her hand to her chin and nodded.

“Hmph, just a little further.”

I looked up at the sky, to see it dyed a dark red then I checked my pocket watch.

We’ve still got a bit longer until sunset.

“Want to go for another two hours today?”

Eve got to her feet.

“Too-ka, let me scout ahead.”

“Be careful out there.”

“Mhmm.” Eve walked away, disappearing into the darkening trees. With her radar-like detection abilities, she was ideally suited to reconnaissance.

“Eve really is energetic, isn’t she?” Seras said with a giggle. “Whoa!” Suddenly Seras lost her footing and came stumbling forward, toward me. She caught herself on the wall with her hand just before crashing down on top of me. Meanwhile, I was getting ready to catch her in my arms.

She’s practically in my face, it’s like our noses are touching.

“Are you okay? You fell...”

“Y-yes... I’m so sorry.” Seras forced an easy smile. “I’m fine, really,” she said.

“That’s a lie, isn’t it?”

“I-I may be a little tired, but...”

I’d messed up. I’d been so focused on making sure Lis was fine that I’d neglected to pay attention to Seras. She hid her fatigue well, unlike Eve who wore her feelings on her face and made it obvious.

I’m probably doing fine just because of all these stat modifiers that help me keep moving. Seras doesn’t have all that much stamina to begin with.

“I’m sorry. I should’ve thought of you more,” I said.

She tried to suppress her emotions entirely, putting on a poker face.

“If it’s only another hour or two, then I’m sure—” she started.

“No. You need to rest.”

I gripped Seras by both shoulders and helped her up as I stood myself.

“I’m so sorry,” she said.

“You don’t need to apologize. Just don’t push yourself too hard... Okay?”

“...I understand.”

“It’d be a problem for me if you keeled over somewhere, yeah? Get some rest, for my sake.” I patted her on the shoulder, concerned.

“Yes, I will... Thank you, Sir Too-ka.”

“I don’t need apologies, but I’ll take as much thanks as you can give.”

Seras looked down somewhat happily, and laid a hand on her chest.

“Not like we had much chance of finding a better place to camp this late anyway,” I said.

“Too-ka,” Eve interrupted, walking back toward us.

“What is it?”

“A little further ahead, there’s another huge ruin.”

We followed Eve, and found the large building as promised, beyond a stand of trees and sitting in the middle of the ruins.

“It’s massive.”

It didn’t look as damaged as the others. I saw a long staircase in the center and could make out a door at the top.

Looks like an Egyptian pyramid... Nah, more like the ruins of some Mayan civilization.

We climbed and Slei followed us carefully—hoof by hoof—up the stairs. The sun was almost setting as we reached the top, darkness spreading through the trees.

If there’s nothing useful in here, we might still have time to head back

to the other ruins and make camp.

I looked around and could see far across the unwooded area from which we'd come. I turned back to the door.

There was a crystal set in its center.

...This again. But it looks like there's already some MP in this crystal gauge.

"Before I called you over, I tried pouring some mana into it myself," admitted Eve, "but this was all I could manage. I'll have to count on you for the rest."

"Leave it to me."

Right, then... We're on a high platform, and this crystal's light might draw out some monsters.

I asked Seras to take a blanket out of one of our bags and I used it to cover myself and the light from the crystal. Then I checked my MP gauge to see how much was left, and began to pour my mana in. Before long, the door opened with a rumbling sound.

"Impressive," said Eve.

"...It doesn't appear to be a very large space, but I don't sense any monsters in here," said Seras, leading the way with the spirit of light to guide us.

"How about we stay here for the night then?" I suggested.

We all filed inside, following Seras's light, but then I turned to look back.

There were lights, flickering in the distance, blinking on and off over the trees.

They must be coming from beyond the bounds of the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters... But what's going on? A fight between monsters?

I pictured Eve's map in my mind, the position of our two dots.

Ulza was to the south, meaning that light is from the northeast...

Recognition swept over me.

"...Ah, Alion. That's where that damned foul Goddess is."

THE DRAGONSLAYER

BANEWOLF, the Dragonslayer, leaned an elbow against the battlements of the royal castle of Alion and drank. He looked out over the barracks and watched the soldiers hurrying here and there in the yard below as they prepared for the coming battle with the Demon Empire.

“So...why’d you leave me here in Alion?” he asked the Goddess as she passed by.

“I can’t afford to be shorthanded now, can I?” she answered, stopping to speak with him. The heroes from another world had departed the castle several days earlier, heading southwest for the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters. “I wished to accompany them personally...yet I have business to attend to in Magnar on the morrow. Oh, it worries me so. I wonder if they are all quite safe.”

“You sent the Sabre-Toothed Tigers, Nyantan, and all Four Holy Elders with them. They’re gonna be fine.”

“You saying, ‘Oh, it’s fine,’ only makes me worry more, you know.” Vicius turned to look at him, and Banewolf leaned another elbow on the railing.

“You stoppin’ me from going with them... That have something to do with Ayaka Sogou?” he asked.

“Whatever do you mean?” Vicius tilted her head, feigning confusion.

“It’s more dangerous for them out there with me gone.”

“Such an incomprehensible suggestion. I don’t know how to respond...”

“You tryin’ to get someone in her group killed?”

“Hmmm? Whyever would I do such a thing?”

Banewolf scratched his beard and looked up at the sky. “I’m just thinkin’. She’d be easier to manipulate without me around, and if something happened to one of her friends...”

“I literally have no idea what you are suggesting. Have you taken leave of your senses? Is this in fact some pet theory and only you can piece together the logic?”

“Just that people are easy to control when they’re broken. The more broken the better.”

“I-it truly vexes me when you make such wild accusations. Allow me to change the subject... Is your father well, Bane?”

“...Guess so.”

“If I recall correctly, you joined the Monster Slayer Knights to save your father as he lay sick, did you not? How noble of you to help the man who so commendably raised you single-handedly.”

Vicius stood beside Banewolf on the battlements and leaned her arms against the railing. She looked out over the barracks with him, her eyes filled with sorrow.

“There is that mine in Ulza that produces those unique minerals, no? Minerals used in vital medicines that are capable of suppressing your father’s illness. The Monster Slayer King Jin is the one who holds controls that mine, I believe? A snap of his fingers and everything might change. One might call it a perilous situation, but I’m quite sure you don’t need to worry about a thing.”

As Banewolf turned to look at her, she took both his hands in hers and gripped them tightly.

“So long as I continue to whisper in the ear of the Monster Slayer King, your father will continue to receive his expensive medicine free of charge. That’s an amicable arrangement, is it not?”

“...That’s why the famously lazy Dragonslayer came rushing here at your beck and call, ain’t it?”

“And it was wonderfully considerate of you. I am so happy to have you.”

There was easy work for a man of his abilities all over the continent, and if it were up to him, he’d happily be part of an independent mercenary band. But Banewolf lost his mother when he was young, and his father had put everything he could into raising him before he’d collapsed from his illness. So, he joined the knights of Ulza to take care of the man who had taken care of him.

“...I’m aware of my position, y’know. I haven’t forgotten.”

“How mature of you!”

“But what about that stubborn-ass captain of the White Wolf

Riders...got him under your thumb yet?"

"Excuse me? What connection does that have to the topic at hand?" Nobody could answer questions with questions like the Goddess could. "Well... Pardon my changing the subject again, but what do you think of the present heroes from another world?"

Banewolf looked off to the southwest. "Kiri-hara is clearly on the path to becoming the strongest. Best of the bunch against the Demon King, I reckon."

"I see, I see...and the others?"

"That A-class Oyamada's making steady strides too. Yasu...I was a bit worried at first, but I think he's coming along as well. Sogou's growing faster than the both of them, but she seems conflicted. Worrying about her unique skill not developing yet must have something to do with it. Haven't seen Hijiri and Itsuki enough to know much about them. Seems like not even Nyantan was able to control them, though."

"Those sisters are not quite in open rebellion...yet. They do not obey orders as faithfully as I would like—especially the elder. I cannot tell much of what they are thinking myself, in truth. The human heart is ever a difficult thing."

"Oh, and there's another I'm interested in—for different reasons though, I s'pose..."

"Oh? Who's that?"

"Asagi Ikusaba."

"Ikusaba, is it?"

Since arriving in the capital, Asagi Ikusaba was the only hero Banewolf had deliberately avoided.

"I'm not good with people like that, y'know? Never was."

KASHIMA KOBATO

IT WAS THEIR FIRST DAY in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters. In between the dense, overgrown trees Kobato found beastly tracks of

black earth on the forest floor—signs that a monster had passed through. Branches were broken in unnatural ways, and the heavy smell of some creature hung in the air.

On their first day, the heroes had tried their strength by fighting some monsters on the outskirts. After all of their leveling up and the training from their instructors, they won without breaking a sweat.

But—

Kashima Kobato walked with her group through the forest, captive to a fear she could not explain.

“Hey, over there!” cried someone as they spotted a monster.

“Grrrhaaa!”

“Here it is! Our first golden-eyed!”

“Let me do it!”

“Asagi! It should be me!”

The heroes all raised their weapons in unison, driven into a frenzy by the sighting. Heroes could only level up by landing the killing blow on a monster. Some of the students had become addicted to the experience, and Kobato was beginning to feel scared of the mood forming around her.

“Hey, hey! We’re on the same team, ain’t we?” Ikusaba Asagi shouted as she moved to the front, “It’s Kobato-chan’s turn to get some EXP. C’mon frontliners, hold it back with your defense skills! Hold!”

Asagi was now well used to giving orders. The heroes at the front formed up together, using their defensive skills and shields to block the monster’s first attack. Some threw out attacks of their own as they did, wounding it in several places. None of the attacks were fatal—the group had developed a keen sense for how much a monster could take.

With a groan, the creature dropped to its knees and the group switched focus to its legs, preventing it from escaping.

“Take that!”

Both its arms were severed. The scene would’ve been unthinkable back when they had first been summoned into this world and had watched the three-eyed wolf burn to death. All of them were different now—the girl who sliced off both the creature’s arms hadn’t hesitated for a second.

Asagi cheered loudly. “Whoa, getting real good at leaving them that little inch of life left, eh? Fine work, Asagi Squad!”

She squeezed Kobato’s shoulders from behind and slowly pushed her forward.

“Here ya go, Pidgey! One delicious last blow, get it while it’s hot!”

“...Y-yes.”

“Ah, that’s right! Gotta thank everyone don’t ya! We only win ‘cause we work as a team, yeah?”

Kobato hesitantly bowed to the girls on the front line. “Th-thank you...”

The girl she made eye contact with looked away and muttered, “Hey... Asagi’s orders, okay? We didn’t do this for you or anything.”

Asagi looked disappointed and put a hand to her cheek.

“Hey, you there! Don’t say stuff like that! You tryna be mean or what?! We ain’t like Kirihara’s lot; we’re about valuing the bonds of friendship and all that! Well, I mean I know where you’re comin’ from Atsuko...but still!”

“Right? You get it right? You’re so perceptive, Asagi!”

“Heck yeah, I am! Hey, Pidgey-chan! Get! On! With! It!”

Kobato couldn’t say no. The golden-eyed monster glared up at her, its breathing ragged and short. A mixture of blood and drool dripped from the creature’s mouth. Its eyes glowed with pure hatred and murderous intent.

Kobato felt like she was going to be sick.

“Kobato-chan, we can’t get too far away from the others. I don’t want to keep them waiting either, so...” Asagi’s voice took on an urgent tone. “Just kill the thing, already.”

Kobato unsheathed her sword and held it aloft. Apologies filled her mind as she swung, and dealt the creature a finishing blow.

“Hurry the heck up, Ikusaba!”

The complaint came from Oyamada Shougo, who had just caught up with Asagi’s group from behind.

“I’ve been trying to get you to stop calling me that for weeks, jeez!

Oyamada-kun, you're so mean!"

"Huh?! You're always badmouthing us, ain't you! I've noticed, man!"

"Well, well, Oyamada-kun...look, we're just jealous is all. I mean, our group doesn't even have any A-classes, let alone S-class heroes. 'Course we're gonna complain a little, yeah?"

"Huh? You've got a unique skill, don't you? How 'bout we just let you into our group, and—"

"Shougo," Kirihara Takuto cut him off.

"Whaddaya want, Takuto?"

"We don't need her," Kirihara said, turning to Asagi. "Ikusaba, if I need you, I'll be the one to ask. Until then, stay away from us. You aren't the type to be trusted. I've known that since the old world."

Asagi was expressionless, keeping an iron grip on her emotions.

"I feel almost the same way. Glad we have an understanding, Kirihara-kun," she said.

"I don't need you in my group. You'd only get in the way on the path to where I am going."

Asagi cocked her head. "Couldn't agree more."

The mood was ice-cold. There had been friction between their two groups in recent days—a confrontation like this was inevitable.

Suddenly, the tension was broken...

The Four Holy Elders took up battle positions on the front line—Agit had noticed something.

...Huh? What are they doing?

"Hmpf—Looks like we've got a troublesome customer. Our heroes can't likely handle this one on their own. If you could all step back a bit? And er, Sabre-toothed Tigers, set a guard around the heroes, will you?"

"Step back? Ridiculous. Tch, the monsters we've faced here have been weaklings through and through, even shrinking from our approach..." Kirihara turned and strode back to the frontline, his coat whipping around him, his hand on the hilt of his sword. "And most of all, you are underestimating my ability. Perhaps it is time that I set the

record straight.”

Kirihara seemed almost completely unconcerned, but Kobato was completely petrified.

“Wh...”

The monster ripped through the trees. It looked like a massive slug with two great golden dragonfly eyes on either side of its head and several elephant trunk feelers sprouting from its back.

“What are those?! They look like freakin’ human arms on either side of its body... Ugh! That thing looks so nasty! Gross!” said Chigasaki Atsuko from Asagi’s group, her voice filled with disgust.

More of the slug-like monsters emerged from the woods and most of the heroes began to step back, overwhelmed by what they saw. The creatures’ grotesque appearances were bad enough, but the creatures also radiated power. Their ungodly strength was immediately apparent. Nothing the heroes had faced before could even compare. Agit’s command to fall back was starting to seem very sensible.

In a flash, Nyantan leapt forward onto all fours. She raised her hips and flexibly lowered her head to the ground as her snake-like tail of blades glowed brightly, almost like a cat trying to intimidate a foe.

“I’ll take the one in front,” she called out to Agit.

“Think you can handle it?” he called back

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll take the one behind it. You coming too, Abis?”

“Ye-p,” she drawled.

The three of them didn’t seem intimidated at all by what was happening, but Kobato swallowed hard.

How can they be so calm, standing in front of monsters like those...?

“Hrroohn!!”

The monsters’ skin was sticky and covered with leaves and branches. They spread their feelers wide, searching as the elephantine trunks on their backs whipped through the air at supersonic speed. Nyantan nimbly leapt over the feelers as they sprouted scythe-like blades that twirled and danced through the air in deadly pursuit.

Nyantan was still faster, barely visible as she parried the pursuing

blades. The blades of her tail-whip were stronger and sharper, and soon the beast's feelers fell to her attacks.

"Oghooegh!"

Set between its golden eyes, the monster's mouth gaped open and vomit burst forth, splashing and fizzing as it hit the ground below and sending a pungent stench into the air. Evidently, if this monster couldn't slice its prey with its blades, it herded the prey with its feelers until it could dissolve the victim in acid.

When Kobato looked, Nyantan was nowhere to be seen. Then something caught her eye.

Nyantan was standing behind the monster.

Sensing her, it bellowed and sent its feelers flying backward to attack. Nyantan rotated her snake-like bladed tail in a spiral around herself. There was the sound of air being sliced, and Kobato saw several feelers drop lifelessly to the ground. It seemed as if Nyantan's blades were somehow growing sharper, and her tail continued to swiftly slice through the feelers.

Suddenly, the blades glowed blindingly bright and grew rapidly in size.

"Orrhooaah?!"

Nyantan landed gracefully on the ground on one knee.

Behind her, her tail surrounded the monster. It rampaged and rained down a hurricane of attacks upon the hapless creature. It tried to block the attacks with its huge arms, both those arms were completely severed as they flailed.

Seconds later, the monster was left in pieces.

I-incredible...

The deadly effectiveness of Nyantan's tail was matched only by her elegance and grace. Kobato was completely captivated by the battle from start to finish.

That is a disciple of Vicius... She should be the one sent out against the Demon Empire, not us.

Nyantan stood up quickly, looking composed and unconcerned.

Agit Angun rushed excitedly to her side. "Should've expected as much from you, Nyantan!"

“My apologies, I appear to have ended its life. I should have allowed it to live in order to provide EXP for the heroes,” she said coolly.

“Can’t be helped. Lose focus for a second against a monster like that, and you’re going to get hurt.” Agit drew his sword and turned to face the monster that was bearing down on him.

It was dragging its arms to slow itself but still had considerable momentum. As it approached, it collided with a tree and sent it flying into the air. The monster caught the trunk with its massive, muscular arm.

“Ah!” Kobato exclaimed.

With a roar, it hurled the tree at Agit, but he dodged the attack easily. His sword began to glow white, increasing in intensity until the whole blade was brilliant. Keeping his body and sword low, Agit charged toward his foe.

He’s evading them all...

To Kobato’s eyes, he moved so fast that it appeared he was teleporting across the battlefield. He never even paused to parry an attack, but simply dodged them all as he closed into range.

The slug-like creature let out an angry, wailing battlecry, and belched its acid at its attacker, but not a single drop came close to hitting Agit.

Agit’s sword of light was now many times longer than it had been when he began his charge. In a flash, he sliced diagonally upward at the monster.

A shallow gash was left in the earth, and Kobato’s eyes followed it to see the monster sliced completely in two.

Then Agit slashed down once more, cutting between the creature’s two golden eyes to make sure the job was done.

“Two down, six to go, eh?” Agit turned and called out to his sister Abis. “Some of them have changed direction. Looks like they’re going after the heroes in back.”

“Leave it to me,” she answered, pumping her arms as she sprinted to the back of the group, Nyantan following close behind.

Agit turned to face the next monster, approaching him from the

front.

“Right, then, I’ll just deal with you, and—”

“You asked me to retreat because of this thing?” Kirihara said as he stepped to stand beside Agit.

“Kirihara.”

“Let me show you what righteousness is. When it comes right down to it, the only true righteousness...” Kirihara stretched both his arms out toward the monster. “...power.”

The third slug-like monster revealed itself.

“Draconic Buster.”

The crazed monster was almost upon them, its gaze seemingly fixed on Agit as a thick stream of golden energy shot from both of Kirihara’s hands. The hero waved his arm, causing the stream of light to bend in response to his movements and swing back to defend. The light soared freely through the air like a dragon, mercilessly devouring the monster. It severed the monster’s lunging feelers before diving to pierce the monster’s body.

Filled with holes, the crippled creature’s bellows ceased. Blood poured from the carcass.

Kirihara turned to look back at the other heroes.

“My unique skill is at level 4 now. Burn what you just saw into your memories. This is the power...” He glanced at Agit once, then spread his arms open wide emphatically. “...of your future king.”

Then there was the sound of immolation and in an instant, the dying monster was completely enveloped in black flames, and quickly burned to ash, Kirahara narrowed one eye in disdain.

“Turning your back before delivering the final blow. Such terrible complacency, I have to say. This could’ve gone a lot worse, Kirihara.”

A dark shadow fell across Kirihara’s face. He glared at the A-class hero who had dealt the final blow, with hatred and disgust in his eyes.

“...Yasu.”

TAKAO ITSUKI

“SOMETHING HAS HAPPENED TO THE OTHERS,” Takao Hijiri said as she looked down at several male corpses lying on the ground at her feet. Their deaths hadn’t been her handiwork—they’d killed themselves.

Takao Itsuki turned to look at her sister, still kneeling on the earth. “Maybe we should get back.”

They had taken the opportunity to slip away from the others—they’d gotten good at noticing when Nyantan wasn’t paying attention to them. They sensed Nyantan searching for them earlier, but she’d turned back to the larger group for some reason.

“Itsuki.”

“Hmm?”

Hijiri elegantly folded her arms as she inspected the bodies. Every little movement and gesture her elder sister made was captivating to Itsuki.

“Who do you suppose they were? They didn’t hesitate to kill themselves as soon as they realized that there was no escape. Spies, perhaps?” pondered Hijiri.

“Like some watchers from another country, y’mean?”

“Well, I do wonder about that.”

Hijiri seemed to feel nothing as she looked at the corpses—she was as calm as ever. And no matter what happened, Itsuki could pretend everything was “just like normal” so long as her older sister was there.

“It appears to be that they were here to enact some plot against us,” said Hijiri. “I believe they were sent by the Goddess Vicius.”

Chapter 2: Humanoid Monsters

AFTER ENTERING THE PYRAMID among the ruins, we put down our bags—my leather pouch provided more than enough light for us to see inside.

We took a look around the small entrance room, but found nothing of interest except for an altar in the back—likely the ruined pyramid had been used for some kind of religious ceremonies. No hidden doors or passageways could be found. The whole place looked like it had just been abandoned as it was.

After our search around we settled in to eat dinner, until Seras suddenly stopped eating and sat back deep in thought.

“Perhaps the reason you don’t laugh and smile quite so happily is because I am so dull and boring,” she confessed, prompting everyone else to quickly deny it.

After that strange comment, dinner passed uneventfully. We ate, chatted, and prepared our beds for the night.

Lis sounded like she was struggling.

“I’ll help you change, Lis,” offered Eve

“No, I can do it on my own...”

“It doesn’t look that way. Let me help, at least for the time being.”

Lis sighed, resigned to her fate.

We had stopped at a village on our way here to buy new clothes for Lis, and unfortunately they were a little small. They were much better than her old ones, of course...but they would take some getting used to. I turned away as Lis took off her jacket.

“We’ll have to buy some proper clothes for Lis sooner or later,” I said, sitting down next to Seras.

“The new ones suit her, though,” she replied, brushing her shining golden hair with a comb.

She takes care of her appearance even here in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters. I’ll forget about that confession she made at dinner for now.

I lay down, my head on my arm.

“Almost anything would suit her I bet... Lis is pretty to begin with. But it's not like she'd complain no matter what we made her wear, would she? We should figure out what she actually likes,” I said.

“Yes, you're right. I will try to find an opportunity to ask her about her taste in clothes.”

“Thanks... Come to think of it, whatever clothes you put on would suit you too, Seras.”

“...Is that so?”

“Yeah.”

She looked off to the side, as if she was remembering something.

“What's on your mind?”

“Ah, well... I was reminded of the princess. She was always finding new outfits for me to wear. Before I knew it, it had become quite the hobby of hers.”

“Well, you must've been a good model.”

Seras doesn't often talk about her past like this.

“Pakyuun!”

“Squee!”

Little Slei galloped past us, Piggymaru on her back.

They get along so well.

Seras really misunderstood the Holy Emperor's intentions, huh. I wonder if that affects how she looks back on her relationship with the princess? They used to be close, didn't they?

Come to think of it, the princess was engaged to marry Civit. I wonder what she's doing now that he's dead. Maybe Seras is worrying about that too. She doesn't usually let this stuff show on the surface.

“You and the princess must've been close.”

“I think we were, yes.”

“Seras, listen if—”

“I am your knight now. I pledged my sword to your service. Please, don't concern yourself with this any further,” she interrupted, evading the topic. “And I'm confident the princess is well. She's

intelligent, and...I'm sure she's conducting herself properly."

There was no hint of a lie in Seras's confidence—the princess really must be smart, huh.

Looking at Seras though, sitting there with her back straight with such elegant posture, there was a thin veil of sadness which covered her beautiful features. I only saw it within her because of how intently I watched.

"I trust the princess, so it doesn't bother me," was what she meant to say.

...That can't really be the truth.

Seras caught herself with a start, realizing she had said too much. She moved her cherry blossom lips to speak several times, but stopped herself. It seemed she wanted to change the topic but couldn't find a way to do so.

"Didn't you mention you wanted to wash up before bed?" I asked.

Seras clapped her hands together, as if I'd just rescued her.

"Ahem... Th-that's right. Lis, shall we bathe together? We could help wash each other's backs. Do you mind?"

"O-okay. Th-thank you, Miss Seras," she replied, still changing.

Seras dampened two cloths with water and grinned at me.

"How about you and I do the same afterward, Sir Too-ka?"

I laughed, and waved at her to get on with it.

"Enough with the jokes, go on already."

"Heh heh, okay." Seras skipped over happily to the entrance, taking Lis with her.

She was joking, right? At least, I think that was a joke. To be honest...I'd really prefer if Seras didn't joke like that. Pick the wrong person to try that one with, and it could lead to a big misunderstanding.

Once the two of them were gone, Eve came over to sit next to me to talk about Seras's strange comments at dinner.

Seras had confided in us at dinner that the nobles during her time as a knight had repeatedly told her roughly the same thing—"Lady Seras, you have beauty without parallel and charm to be sure, but are

somewhat lacking in humor, one might say.”

“I’m surprised, never thought Seras would worry about a thing like that,” she said.

“But there are all kinds of other things she’s great at, aren’t there? Who cares about the sense of humor of some stuck-up nobles? She should be the one sneering at them, if anything,” I said.

Eve folded her arms, thinking.

“At dinner, I was trying to explain all Seras’s strong points to her, right? Nothing seemed to cheer her up... I might’ve actually just ended up confusing her more. What did I do wrong?”

I scratched my head. “Maybe you need to be a little more delicate about it?”

“Delicate?”

“From her perspective, maybe trying to cheer her up was only making her worries worse. She might not know how to deal with talking about it, if she’s not even willing to admit those feelings to herself.”

“Really?” she asked in disbelief.

For being called Eve Speed, she could be really slow sometimes.

After some time, Eve and Lis returned from washing themselves. We all prepared for bed and lay down. As I lay there, my mind wandered back to the scene I’d witnessed outside.

“Hey, Seras.”

“Yes?”

“Before we came in here did you see those lights off in the distance?”

“Yes, I saw them.”

“What do you think they were?”

“A fight between two monsters, perhaps?”

“Do the monsters around here often fight each other?”

“It is said that golden-eyed monsters born of different sources of evil may quarrel, yes.”

I thought back over all that Seras had taught me so far. The

golden-eyed monsters, which infested this world, were brought to life by successive generations of Demon Kings, which had all eventually been destroyed by heroes from another world. Some of the monsters, however, were still left alive from previous generations when the new Demon Kings arose, many of them deep in underground ruins or hiding in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters.

“You mean, if their ‘birth parents’ are different, the monsters sometimes fight?”

“Yes, but in general, golden-eyed monsters do appear to have strong bonds of fellowship compared to other animals.”

I see, so they tend to stick together, huh. They don't often fight.

“Hmm.”

“Sir Too-ka? What's wrong?”

“Eh? Ah...nothing, just thinking about that light.”

If it wasn't a fight between monsters, then...who were they fighting out there?

SERAS ASHRAIN

WHEN SERAS AWOKE, Too-ka was nowhere to be seen. She quickly shook Eve awake, who laid a hand on the spot where Too-ka had been sleeping.

“Much of the warmth has gone... He's been away for a while.”

“His bags are still here,” said Seras, scanning the room uncomfortably.

Lis was still sleeping, and Slel looked like she had just woken up.

“Sir Piggymaru isn't here, either,” she noted.

“Piggymaru? Hmm... Perhaps he woke up earlier than expected and went out to try some new combination techniques with the slime. It's Too-ka, he probably didn't want to wake us.”

“If that's all it is, that's fine I suppose.”

“He isn't the kind of man who would just abandon us in the

middle of the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters without saying a word. You should know that as well as anyone.”

“Yes, I do,” Seras replied confidently.

She and Eve walked to the entrance, swords in hand, and noticed that the door’s mana crystal had been activated.

“He’s outside—maybe my guess was right,” said Eve, trying to dispel Seras’s worries as they both walked out of the pyramid into the crisp morning air.

Suddenly, they saw it.

They looked down the staircase leading down to the ground, and a thing lay on the earth at the bottom. It was a monster with a human face. Eve stared at it, backing away from the creature instinctively.

“Is that a humanoid type?! It can’t be...”

There were huge human faces stuck to the creature’s tall and long body, their eyelids sewn shut with what looked like thread. Only one of the faces had its eyes open—the smallest one in the center. Tentacle-like appendages covered its body.

A familiar form sat cross-legged before it.

“Sir Too-ka?”

A puddle of blue blood surrounded the creature, which appeared to already be dead. Tentacles hung lifelessly from many of the mouths, blood dripping out along their length to add to the growing pool below.

Too-ka sat a short distance away, flipping through his book beyond the growing radius of the foul puddle. At his side, Seras saw his shortsword, and what appeared to be a part of the monster wrapped up in cloth. Piggymaru was bouncing up and down beside him. Too-ka craned his neck to look back in their direction.

“Oh, you’re awake.”

Eve swallowed hard before she could speak. “Too-ka, th-that monster...” she said.

“I felt its presence in the night, so I came out and killed it.”

“A-are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I watched it carefully and waited for my chance to take it down. I didn’t take any risks.”

“Is that thing a h-humanoid type?”

“I guess so? Not as difficult to deal with as I’d been expecting though. Loads of EXP in this thing, at least. I even leveled up.” Too-ka tapped the cloth-wrapped monster part he’d collected. “I’ve been checking the *Forbidden Arts: Complete Works* for any materials I can use.”

“You seriously defeated a humanoid monster single-handedly? And you aren’t even hurt? Hmph. Am I dreaming this?” asked Eve, rubbing her eyes.

“No... That is the real Sir Too-ka down there,” said Seras, looking down at him. He seemed much taller than he had before, and she felt a renewed sense of confidence surging through her chest.

Now I remember. He was the one who suggested we come to the nightmarish depths of this land in the first place. He can make the impossible possible.

Seras could only overcome her desperation at being in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters because she was with him. She turned to look at Too-ka as if all her worries had been swept away.

Please, don’t try to bear too much of this burden on your own...

“Some of these humanoid monsters are stronger than the others. Just learning that is valuable information. But they’re also just as aggressive and sadistic as the others.” He looked down at the monster’s corpse, now just a miserable lump of meat. “But I’m glad of that...”

His face showed no emotion as he stared at the dead monster, lightly closing the book in his other hand.

“Means I don’t have to feel bad about slaughtering them.”

MIMORI TOUKA

WE LEFT THE PYRAMID RUINS the next morning, putting a fair amount of distance between ourselves and where we’d spent the night.

After checking my level for the second time, I closed my stat window and continued walking, gazing at ripped-up trees as we passed. I was at the front of the line with Seras behind me, Lis and Sleil following in her wake while Eve brought up the rear. Sleil was in her second stage of transformation, head bobbing from side to side as she walked. She didn't look as if she minded the bags we had strapped to her back. Piggymaru was in its usual rope worm shape, snuggled up inside my robes.

"It's quieter than I expected," noted Seras.

"We might have cleared out all the creatures that were hanging around that humanoid monster's lair on our way to the pyramid yesterday," answered Eve.

"Might be the opposite," I cut in.

"The opposite?"

"Maybe the other monsters in the area were running away from that one."

I didn't see any other monsters in the humanoid monster's lair in the Ruins of Disposal, either—could be that other monsters avoid them or just have a habit of leaving them to their own prey.

I mulled over the idea. "Maybe these monsters aren't all living as peacefully as we thought they were."

Now my mind was racing.

I can't relax yet, but maybe these aren't unbeatable monsters. I've faced two of them so far, and killed both using the right tactics. I can't deny that my status effect skills made it far easier than I expected.

But the humanoid monsters were still shrouded in mystery—even Seras knew very little about their biology.

Their aggression and ferocity... Their sadism and cruelty... What makes them that way? Why were they created?

I took out the triple-wrapped cloth from my bag, still wet and warm. Seras leaned over to take a look. Inside the cloth were tentacles from the humanoid monster I had just killed.

"Are those materials for some forbidden item?" she asked.

"There was nothing in the book about which materials to take..."

But there was a picture that looked similar to these things. I figured I might be able to use them as a substitute.”

Seras looked up at me as we walked.

“Page 167, right?”

Not even I remembered the page numbers!

“I don’t remember what they’re used to make though—”

Seras raised her index finger, looking somewhat pleased with herself. “A voice-amplifying crystal.”

She’s got me there.

“Now you’ve read it so closely, you know way more about the *Forbidden Arts: Complete Works* than I do,” I said, scratching my head. I’d seen her finding time to carefully study the book when we made camp.

Seras stretched her back, turned back to the path and ran her fingers through her golden hair.

“At first It was just my interest in reading, but I... I thought this would be a way I might be of help to you, Sir Too-ka.”

“I’m going to keep finding time to read over it myself, but I might be relying on you for the details a lot. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Not at all, you can count on me.” Seras nodded respectfully, laying a hand across her chest.

“Sorry to burden you like this.” Since we arrived in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters, I had less time on my hands for reading.

“There is no need to apologize... Part of the reason I read is for my own enjoyment, after all.”

“Even so, it really helps.”

“...I see!” There was a happy little spring in her reply. I knew it was only a matter of time before Seras took an interest in the book.

Might not be a bad idea to leave the research to Seras for a while. I do feel kinda bad about setting her up like this, though.

Seras came back over to me to look at the cloth bag in my hands. “By the way, Sir Too-ka, there was another thing that I noticed in the book which might prove useful an—hyaaaah!” Seras screamed suddenly and fell backward onto the ground. She turned pale, the blood draining

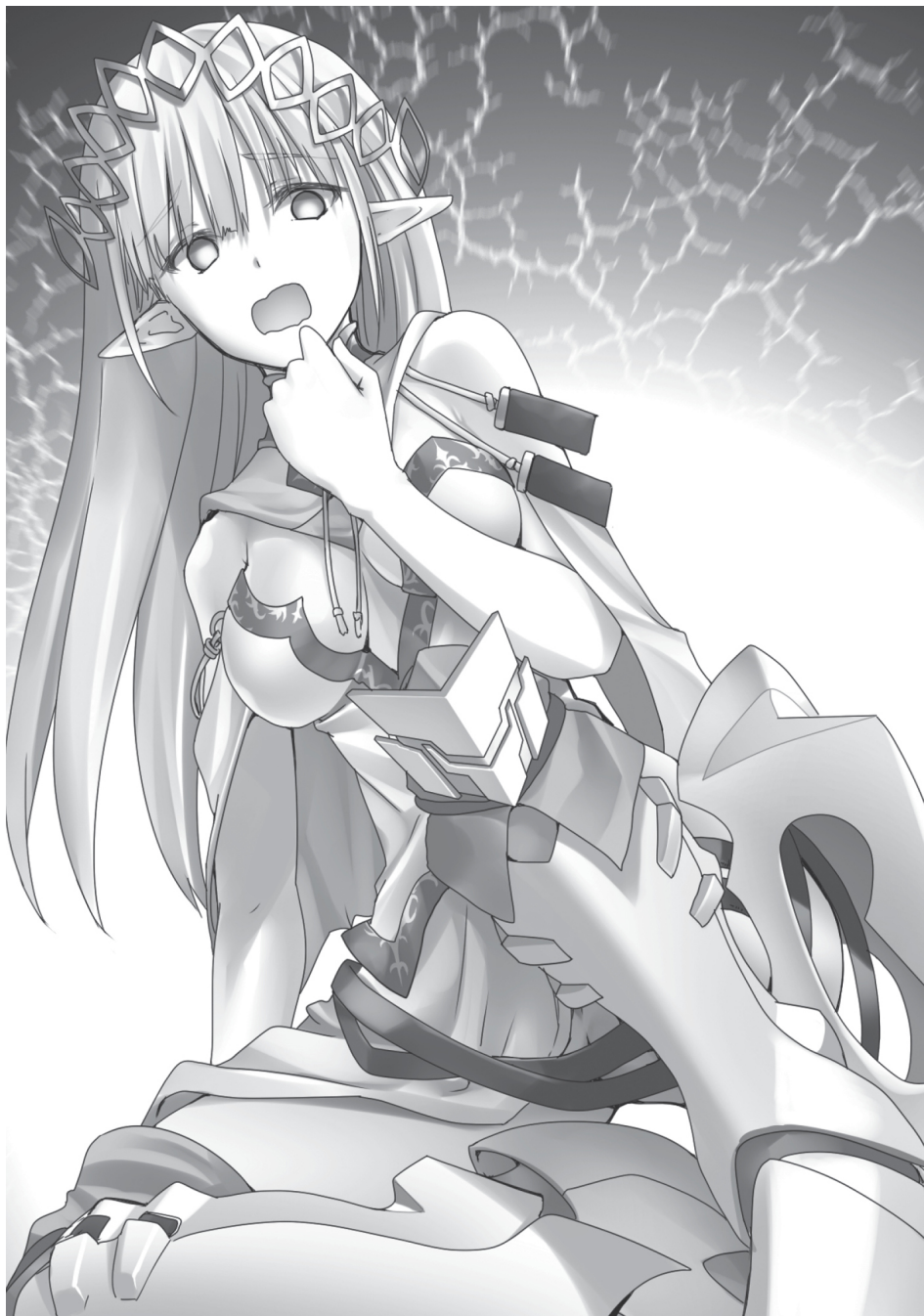
from her face.

“Huh?!” I recoiled in shock.

What happened?! Was she freaked out by the monster tentacle? No, that can't be it; she was fine looking at it earlier. What changed?

I looked into the bag. “Eh?”

There was a different-colored tentacle mixed in with the others, and it was still wriggling around. I pulled it out.



“A worm...? Ah, must’ve gotten mixed in here when I was cutting up the monster.”

“S-Sir Too-ka... That’s quite a serious threat... I-I mean it might be difficult for me to... I-it’s dangerous...”

What does she mean, a serious threat?

“All right, already, just get yourself together.” I threw the worm into the bushes.

“You really don’t like worms, do you?”

“...I have to admit, I do not.”

“I’m just surprised this would be your weakness. You’re fine with Piggymaru writhing around, and those humanoid monster tentacles, right?” I asked.

“For some reason, it’s just worms I can’t stand... I simply can’t stand them!”

Seras stood up and brushed the earth from her back. Her expression was once again elegant and composed, probably trying to compensate for her earlier panic. She cleared her throat solemnly.

“However, as a proud knight, such...phobias are unworthy of me. To be so agitated by simple disgust in this manner... As former captain of the Band of the Holy Knights of Neah, I feel I have disgraced my order and—waaah! Sir Too-ka threw it away! Don’t bring it any closer, Eve! H-have you gone insane?!”

“S-sorry,” said Eve, trudging to the back of the line as Lis scolded her.

So even Seras can get flustered... I feel like I’ve got a glimpse of an interesting new side to her. It’s important to know your party members’ weaknesses, too.

From then on, the mood in our party became surprisingly jovial. The long hours in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters put us all on edge, but for the time being, we didn’t sense any monsters nearby.

Can’t hurt to goof off from time to time. This has to be rough on their nerves—I can’t blame them. And the monsters we face in this forest aren’t the only enemy. There’ll likely be no more rest from here on out. There’s only one safe haven in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters for us now, I’m sure of it.

We continued on our journey.

“There’s moisture in the air,” said Seras, holding back her hair in the light breeze. Eve looked up at the sky.

“Looks like a shower’s coming,” she said.

The scenery around us had changed—almost as if the tree trunks and leaves had darkened, proof that we were finally in the deeper parts of the forest now.

“I think we should check out that area over there,” I said, pointing to the rock face looming up over the trees before us. It looked almost like a miniature mountain range, forming a wall in front of us.

I asked Eve to look at the map, and we exchanged glances.

“Too-ka.”

“Yeah, I know.”

I figured we were close, but... We’ve already come this far, eh?

“Judging by this distance—if we hurry, we could arrive tomorrow or the day after,” she said.

The Forbidden Witch was close by now.

“Now, what do we do about this?” I pondered, looking up at the rock face. Tall cliffs stretched directly across the path, like a wall standing in our way.

“Unless one of us can fly, we aren’t getting over it,” I said to myself.

Piggymaru’s rope wasn’t going to be long enough either—and even then, it wouldn’t be strong enough to hold us all. Eve lay a hand on the stone.

“Never expected we’d hit a wall like this,” she said.

Looking to the left and right, I saw the cliff continued a long way in both directions—so much so that I couldn’t see where it ended. Shifting my gaze, I found a cave opening and decided to take a closer look.

Might be able to take shelter from the rain in here, at least...

“Didn’t lead me to the other side, unfortunately,” I said, as I came back out of the opening.

Eve’s map only told us our current location and the rough distance to our goal—nothing about hills and mountains.

Considering the mental state of everyone here, I’d rather not make a big detour—I just want to get to the witch’s place as soon as possible...

“I’ll take Sleir around the wall to see what I can find.”

Better if it’s just me on a scouting mission like this. If I encounter a humanoid monster, my status effect skills are the best at dealing with them, and I can always just transform Sleir again and retreat if things get dangerous.

I left the three ladies to rest and went to scout the area. I first went west along the wall—but after a long ride, there was no sign that I’d find a pass in the cliff face any time soon. Thankfully, the east side of the rock tapered off surprisingly quickly, and it looked as if we could find a spot to get around and back on track.

I returned to the others, and they were relieved to hear what I’d found. We decided to take the eastern path, setting off with Eve in the lead.

“Don’t sense any monsters yet,” she said, looking a little more relaxed than usual.

Seras walked beside her and had also relaxed her guard.

“There are so few out here... Is it because we are closer to the Forbidden Witch now?” she asked.

“Could be that more monsters live on the outskirts than at the center,” Eve suggested.

“I see. That’s possible.”

We saw several groups of ruined buildings as we walked—possibly leading to underground dungeons.

I wonder if there are whole hordes of them down there...

With that in mind, I couldn’t let my guard down. I walked at the back of our party to talk with Lis.

We’ve seen corpses and humanoid monsters, and she’s just a kid. It wouldn’t surprise me if this is affecting her mental health. She’s the type to bottle that up.

“You doing all right?” I asked.

“Ah, yes.”

She seems fine... She'd have to be quite the actor to hide her feelings from me.

“You aren’t scared of the monsters?”

“It’s not that I haven’t been scared... I’m okay.” Lis gently brought her hands together.

“You aren’t going to give me any nonsense, like you’d rather die here with Eve than have kept living there in Monroy, are you?”

Lis forced a smile. “I-I have felt that way, but...I don’t think about dying. Since I’ve been with you, I’ve spoken to Miss Seras a number of times.”

She looked toward Seras at the front of the line.

“Miss Seras said that so long as you’re alive, she knew we would reach our goal safely.”

So, Seras didn’t tell her “So long as we never give up,” eh? Smart. She knows I’m the kind of person who would pretend to surrender so I could get in a surprise attack on my opponent.

“She really trusts me,” I murmured to myself.

“Heh heh... But now I trust that as long as you’re alive, Mr. Tooka, I don’t need to be scared. The best I can do is stay out of your way when you’re fighting. I just concentrate on that.” Lis stroked Sleis’s back as she walked alongside. “We’ve got Sleis too, don’t we?”

“Pakyuun. ♪”

I was essentially the leader of our group. Seras and Eve often waited for my orders and prioritized following them above pretty much anything else. Now it looked like Lis had complete confidence in me as well.

All this responsibility creates pressure. Maybe most people would bend in the face of that pressure, but...I’m going to get through this. I’m going to live up to their trust in me.

Lis seemed fine, so I went to trade places with Seras at the front of the line. When I got there, Eve was listening carefully to the forest around us.

“Hear anything?”

“No monsters nearby yet... Perhaps they don’t live close to the Forbidden Witch’s house, as Seras suggested.” Eve stroked her jaw. “Surprising about Seras, eh, Too-ka?”

“Hm? You mean that she doesn’t like worms?”

“Hmph, that too. I was talking about her talent as a warrior.” Since entering the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters, Eve and Seras had often woken up early to train together. They worried that the sound of their swords would draw the attention of monsters, so they made sure never to let their weapons clash together.

Similar to karate, I guess—the “sundome” style of stopping your punches before they hit your opponent.

“Now that you mention it...”

I do feel like she’s getting faster. Since we arrived in the capital of Ulza, it feels like she’s changed so much. Maybe changed is the wrong word—more like she’s getting back to her old self. I guess in the Mills Ruins, she wasn’t at her best after all those days she spent on the run. Even in that fight against the Black Dragon Knights, she wasn’t at her full strength.

“She’s been fighting much better, now she can get enough sleep. But that’s enough even to amaze the strongest bloodsport warrior in Monroy?”

“Hmph. She wasn’t named captain of the Band of the Holy Knights just for her looks. She’s a talented warrior.”

Thinking back, didn’t Civit say he wanted to fight her too?

“Stronger than you?”

“I’m physically stronger—and faster, and I possess greater technique—but her potential outweighs mine.”

“You think?”

How does Eve know all this—is it instinct?

“With that spirit armor of hers, most warriors wouldn’t even stand a chance against her,” said Eve.

Seras hasn’t had the best luck with her opponents or fighting conditions to be fair—the White Walkers or the Black Dragon Knights. She was completely exhausted from using her spirit armor both times. Against that

skeleton king and the enemies of the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters the power differences made it tough for her to really show off her abilities.

“Hmm... I suppose you’re right. The strong just attract fame whether they want it or not. Civit Gartland was kind of a special case I guess.”

Eve folded her arms and looked over at me. “And the one who defeated Civit is standing right here. It’s strange to think.”

“It’s because I don’t fight fair. I dragged him down to my level and set a trap to ambush him. That’s all... But, there are others, aren’t there? Strong warriors representing the other countries, or bands of knights I’ve heard other people talking about.”

“Interested in how you measure up? Heh heh, you’re a man after all.”

“...I guess so.”

I’d thought that was all just unnecessary information I could ignore. The only person I really cared about crushing was that foul Goddess. But after meeting Seras and Civit I started to understand the value of knowing who the players were.

You never know when that information might come in handy.

“Well... There’s a woman called the Holy Priest of Yonato up in the northwest, her name’s Curia Guilstein. She commands the Holy Order of the Purge and is said to be the strongest warrior in Yonato. Just under her are the Four Holy Elders, four siblings who it’s rumored are trying to take her crown. I hear the two eldest are especially powerful.”

“Hmm...”

“In the southwest there’s the Empire of Mira. Strongest man there is the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, no question.”

Ah, I remember that name. Why’s it so stupid?

“So what, the emperor himself is the strongest warrior the country has?” I asked.

“He managed to fight all his rival successors to become emperor at a young age, but very few have ever seen him in action. Outside Mira, his true strength is a mystery. The first and second sons of the last emperor are even now personally serving at their little brother’s side—

he's not to be underestimated."

"Hmm... I guess you're the strongest warrior in Ulza, are you?"

"No, there's the Dragonslayer of the Monster Slayer Knights. If the rumors are correct, I wouldn't stand a chance against him," she said.

He might even be stronger than Eve? Well, maybe she's being modest.

"The former Holy Empire of Neah has Seras Ashrain," I continued. "The Bakoss Empire had Civit Gartland... What about Magnar in the north?"

"The strongest warrior from the Kingdom of Magnar is the White Wolf Rider captain, Sogude Sigmus."

Chief Rider of the White Wolf Riders... I remember that name. Civit mentioned wanting to fight him too someday.

"Ever since being named chief rider, none have doubted his worthiness for the position. He is the king's younger brother, but there is no hint of favoritism—he was renowned for his strength and heroism throughout the continent even before his appointment."

But where was he when the Nightwall fell? Well, let's put that aside for now. First was the question I really wanted to ask...

"...What about Alion?"

The country where that foul Goddess keeps her pawns.

"The Thirteen Orders of Alion' are pretty famous, especially the Sixth Order of Knights who are rumored to have unrivaled strength. In terms of individuals, I hear the name Nyantan Kikipat quite often. She was dispatched to Ulza, last I heard."

The Sixth Order of Knights of the Thirteen Orders of Alion, and Nyantan Kikipat... I'll remember those names.

"Also—they don't belong to any country—but the Sabre-Toothed Tigers are a famous mercenary band."

Met them.

"Oh, and a four-person group called the White Walkers."

Killed them.

"And I suppose there's the 'Sword of Courage' too. He's a heroic blood mercenary, but I don't know much about him."

Never heard of him.

“Thanks, that was helpful,” I said.

So, these are the guys I might meet in the future. When that day comes, they might get in my way. Or they could become pawns I can use to my advantage. I don’t know which...but if they turn out to be dangerous enemies of mine, then I’ll annihilate them.

We finally reached the part where the rock tapered off. I left Eve and the others to stand guard while I went off with Sleir to scout ahead.

“Looks good,” I told them when I returned.

We shouldn’t have any more problems from here on out—no more big detours. We’ve managed to avoid any big delays, too.

The land beyond the cliff was damp, but not watery enough for our feet to be sucked down into the mud. We saw small puddles of muddy water dotted about, but otherwise just a thick forest of conifer trees surrounding us on all sides. I looked up at the sky and saw heavy clouds overhead. The air was beginning to get humid around us. It looked like it was going to rain soon.

“We’ve managed to make it so far already,” said Seras.

Eve nodded, turning back to look at Lis.

“You’ve done well, Lis. Too-ka, Seras... I don’t know how to thank you. We would’ve never made it this far without you both.”

“Big Sister? What about Piggymaru and Sleir?”

“Hmph, you’re right. I have to thank Piggymaru and Sleir too, from the bottom of my heart. You’ve helped us so much on our journey.”

Eve bowed respectfully.

“Hey, we needed that map of yours too, Eve. I’m not on this trip for charity’s sake, remember?”

Seras chuckled and smiled at us both. “Even though you deny it, you’re a kind person, Sir Too-ka.”

“I guess so,” I muttered.

“I don’t mind if it’s a small house. I just want a peaceful place—somewhere to live quietly with Lis.” Eve looked off into the distance, a strange sense of longing in her eyes. “Just when I thought my days of fighting as a bloodsport warrior were over, that dream disappeared

before my eyes. But now I have hope again. Finally...my dream might come true.”

Eve’s expression softened. Her cat-like eyes looked fondly at Lis. “Once all this is over with, maybe we can plant crops together. Make a good life. All that might not be too far in the future.”

“Yes...” Lis was overwhelmed with emotion and tears started to well up in her eyes.

“—Eve.” Seras spoke reflexively, calling her name.

Something floated just above Eve’s head.

It appeared suddenly—with no sound and no presence, it came from nowhere. The strange shape floated, like a two-meter-long human’s face had been cut off just under the nose and then suspended in the air. A creature with only a jaw and a mouth, its two front teeth were long and golden and writhed like tentacles.

Those must be its eyes.

Lis turned pale. “Big Sist—”

What is that thing? Is it a humanoid type?

“Ghra!”

“Eve, wai—” I cried out.

Seras drew her sword, pulling herself back to her senses after being caught off guard. But before Seras could move, Eve had her sword from its scabbard and slashed a shining arc in one smooth motion above her head. It looked almost like a samurai’s iaido technique.

Her beautiful and rapid strike hit the monster cleanly in the center.

“Graah!” It let out a hoarse scream, and blood spurted from its flesh as she drove it into the ground with a thud. A puddle of blood formed at Eve’s feet.

Red blood... So it wasn’t a humanoid type.

Eve looked up, confused. Her sword was still stuck in the monster.

“Wh-what is it, Too-ka? Why did you try to stop me?”

“...Is it still alive?” I asked.

“No, I think it’s dead. It isn’t moving.”

Well, the thing did get the jump on her in really close combat. That was definitely the best action she could've taken. But something here stinks.

I looked down at the monster's corpse. It reminded me immediately of the Soul Eater.

It was so close, and it didn't attack immediately... The Soul Eater was the same. It was still as a statue until I showed my intention to strike. Maybe these kinds of monsters only counter when you're about to attack them?

I remembered the laser the Soul Eater fired at me.

The monster that attacked Eve just now looked like a humanoid type, that's why I hesitated to use my status effect skills on it.

"T-Too-ka... Did I do something wrong?" she asked.

"Nah, I was being overly-cautious is all... You didn't do anything wrong, it's just—"

The monster twitched.

In the next instant, it began to glow with light.

"Get away from it, all of you!" I shouted.

Then the monster screamed, a thunderous and deafening squeal that made me cover both my ears.

No, is it trying to...?

I flashed back to the Elite Five, and the man who had been wrapped from head to toe in bandages.

That was to let Civit know that a powerful enemy was nearby, wasn't it? A signal that was designed to activate after death.

The scream and light faded one after the other. Eve turned back to us, removing her hands from her ears.

"Wh-what was that?!"

"I believe those were its dying cries."

"But it was so loud, and—" Then Eve, who had the best hearing of us all, realized what had happened.

They were getting closer. Approaching from all directions.

I closed my eyes, knelt to the ground, and focused on the presences around us. I touched my fingertips to the earth. Cries and roars all jumbled together to fill my ears. I felt an unending series of

tiny vibrations from far away.

Crueler than a blood-soaked torture chamber.

An evil, darker than the darkest night.

A sadism like dripping coal tar.

"Tch. Figures." Even though my mouth was dry, I clicked my tongue in disgust. "Freakin' humanoid types."

I'd defeated one of them before, but this time there were way too many.

That explains why we haven't felt any monsters nearby. That thing we just killed...its scream was meant to bring a terrible horde to us. The weaker monsters that live here must want to avoid setting them off, and so they stay away from where the great mouth monsters live. It's just a theory, but this area is probably littered with these things.

But first I need to figure out how to resolve this situation. I can figure out these monsters' behavioral patterns later.

The birds around us took flight all at once, like messengers of our impending doom. I focused all my energy into listening.

We still have some time before they arrive...

I had already given up on counting how many presences I felt. There was an insane number of them coming for us, and that was all I needed to know.

"Everyone, listen," said Eve, turning to face us with a distant look in her eyes. "I'll make a distraction and draw them away. Use that time to get to the witch's place."

Lis stood still in shock.

Eve looked back in the direction we'd come. "I'll buy enough time for you to escape, no matter what. I'll lead them in the opposite direction and circle back to you once they're clear. You remember the map, Too-ka? Even without it you should be able to find the witch on your own from here."

"Big Sis—"

"Lis," Eve spoke firmly, as if to a much younger child. "I did this to us—it was my carelessness that caused this to happen. I have to be the one to take care of it."

She crouched down, laid a hand on Lis's shoulder and looked up at me.

"I am a leopardman. Maybe I can blend into the herd of monsters and make my escape. My senses are keen and I'm skilled at moving through forests such as these."

Seras didn't hesitate to step up herself. "I am just as used to life in the forest as you are!"

"No, you stand out too much...in more ways than one, heh."

"B-big Sis..." Lis's shoulders were trembling.

"From the sound of those footsteps, we don't have much time. Lis... Listen to what Too-ka and Seras tell you while I'm away, and—"

"All right," I interrupted. "If you insist, I'll trust you with leading them away. I just have one request. Come back to us alive. No matter what."

Eve narrowed her eyes at me, grinning with determination. "Yeah, I promise t—"

"Bullshit."

"T-Too-ka?!"

"I'm not an idiot, Eve. Your chances of survival are way too low."

"B-but I..."

I continued to speak, judging the horde's distance by the sound of their footsteps.

"You're not responsible for any of this. That monster you cut down probably has some way of getting in close to its enemies without revealing itself. There was no way you could've detected it."

"But I..."

"If I'd been in your position, I would have done the very same," said Seras.

That's exactly what I wanted to say—thanks for the backup, Seras. Not to mention Lis was standing closest to Eve at the time. Of course she didn't hesitate. She was just instinctually trying to protect her little sister.

"I should've fired off one of my status effect skills, to be honest. It was my mistake, there's no need for you to bear the weight of it."

"But Too-ka!"

“Listen—in order to meet the Forbidden Witch, I need you with me. She gave that map to a member of your clan, right? It’ll be far easier to make contact with you on our side, that much is obvious. I can’t take the risk of putting you in more danger now,” I explained as I removed the fly mask from my backpack.

Then I took the voice-amplifying crystal from my breast pocket.

Still not hardened all the way, but good enough.

I had spent some time in camp working on it. The voice-amplifying crystal was a magic stone that could make my voice louder and was easier to make compared to most other forbidden tools. I had used different materials than the ones listed in the *Forbidden Arts: Complete Works* however—mine had been harvested from a humanoid monster. But I hadn’t tested it yet, fearing the noise might draw more monsters.

...I hope it works.

I slotted it in next to the voice change crystal in my mask.

“I’m the one who has the best chance of survival against them. Or I should say, Piggymaru, Sleil, and me. My status effect skills are the only things we know will deal lethal damage to those humanoid monsters for sure.”

“Ugh...” Eve was angry, but didn’t deny it.

She must understand. Thinking logically about this, I’m the one best suited to draw them away. I know she feels like it’s her fault, but nobody is blaming her.

“It’s good to have a sense of responsibility, but I’ll be the one who decides who takes risks in this mercenary band. Just accept it—that’s an order.”

“...Sorry.” Eve nodded. “Hmph... I can’t argue.”

Lis bowed once, still on the verge of tears.

“Mr. Too-ka, thank you!”

“Don’t thank me yet. Save it for when we’re safe.”

“—Yes!” she said firmly.

“Sir Too-ka...” Seras had a complicated expression on her face.

She must be worried about me. But I don’t have any more time for

debate. No more time for being considerate.

Seras dropped to one knee, suppressing all the emotions on her face. Her forehead was covered in sweat.

“Good luck in your battle,” she said simply.

A true knight, through and through, isn't she.

“Look after Lis and Eve.”

“Yes.”

I went on to tell her what she should do in the worst-case scenario—if I never came back.

We have to prepare for every possibility.

Seras got up from her knees.

“Understood, Sir Too-ka. Though I would much rather tell you not to speak of such inauspicious things.”

“Glad to have a vice-captain who understands reality. Right, then... I want you to take Eve and Lis back to the cliff and hide yourselves in that cave. You know the one?”

It isn't far from here, and it should be able to hide them.

“I'll leave the timing to you. There'll be a moment when I engage the monster horde... You and Eve will know what to do.”

“Understood.”

For the time being I had them hide in the brush. They all looked like they wanted to say more, but the time for talk was over. I focused my attention once more.

“They're close... Let's get moving.”

I sent mana flowing through the crystal on the back of Sleis neck to uplift her to her third form. Piggymaru poked out of my robes to take a look.

“Let's go.”

I mounted Sleis and started to ride.

“This should be far enough.”

I took out my fly mask and poured mana into the voice-amplifying crystal inside. Then I held the mask close to Piggymaru.

“You get to give the battle signal, Piggymaru.”

“Sque.”

“Do it.”

Piggymaru puffed out, expanding as if building up its strength, and...

“SqueeeEEEEEE!”

Several seconds passed.

“Okay... Here they come.”

I felt the earth shudder, and the overpowering presence of the horde rose around me. They had changed direction and were coming right for us.

Everything according to plan.

“Muah ha ha, you idiots! Lucky you can hear so well, aren’t I? Dumb enough to just run right to me.”

I put on my fly mask and my field of vision narrowed. Annoying, but it would protect my eyes from leaves and limbs as we sped through the forest.

Any brainpower I don’t have to use on dodging branches can be used on other things.

I stirred Sleil into a gallop. She had also transformed parts of her body to give me a place to put my legs. It seemed that even an inexperienced rider like me would be able to manage what was to come.

The monsters are following. Good. The ones at the front are gaining though... They’re going to catch up eventually.

I took a deep breath.

To be honest, I don’t know whether I’m going to make it out of this alive. It all depends on how strong these humanoid monsters are. I haven’t faced enough of them to be sure what kind of stats they have.

Not to mention the sheer number of them. At least I avoided causing Seras and the others to worry back there. If I’d shown even a little weakness, they would’ve tried to stop me. I had to be calm—but it was all an act.

Of course, I intend to make it back to them alive, but I don’t know if I’ll be uninjured. I don’t know what this battle is going to cost me.

“Sorry, you two,” I said, feeling the pressure of the immense horde at my back.

“Sque?”

“Snort...?”

Piggymaru and Sleir aren't in the best condition, either. They're worn out, but...

“Are you willing to risk your lives for me?”

Piggymaru turned red, and Sleir hung her head.

Hmm? Ah...I get it.

“Let me try that again. Are you willing to risk your lives for them?”

“Squee!” came Piggymaru's reply.

This little guy was so timid when I first found him...

“Snort!” The great black horse was brimming with spirit.

They're willing to fight. To fight for their friends.

I felt Piggymaru's roots spreading from the back of my neck, toward my face.

Untold numbers of monsters loomed at my back—their sharp presence sent shivers down my spine. I felt that I was fighting the whole forest—as if the entire Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters was pursuing me. My heart beat faster, and cold sweat poured down my neck.

“Status Open.”

I checked my remaining MP as the black eight-legged horse beneath me sent sprays of muddy water flying up with each hoofbeat.

“Right, then.” I spurred Sleir on faster and shifted around on her back to face my enemy. “Take no prisoners.”

Chapter 3: All That is Left

MY HESITATION AND CAUTION ended up backfiring against that huge-mouthed-monster. Not to mention...

I don't have time to think about that now.

There are so many of them that even if I fire blindly, it's bound to hit some of them. Spray and pray.

The horde was still at my back, gaining on me. I sent out some of Piggymaru's tentacles while facing backward astride Sleï.

"Do it."

Piggymaru's tentacles shot up like a flower in bloom. The countless thin lines they traced up into the sky looked like missiles soaring through the air. Then the tentacles suddenly jerked downward, targeting random monsters still thundering after us in pursuit.

"Berserk."

"Ueh! Ueh! Ueh! Grooh!"

One of the humanoid types howled, blazing fire spilling from its lips.

I could use a bunch of my tentacles to eliminate them, but...

"Urgghh?!"

Something in the horde was changing. The berserking monsters began to indiscriminately attack the others around them. The vibrations I felt running through Sleï's body each time her hooves kicked against the earth began to feel reassuring.

"Good. Destroy each other," I muttered to myself.

Unfortunately, the voice-amplifying crystal's power had run out, and my voice no longer reached the monsters. I checked the transparent display of my stat screen to find I still had more than enough MP left.

"Well, that's a good start. But this isn't over yet."

The monsters behind me ruthlessly annihilated their berserking counterparts—shredding, twisting, and tearing them to pieces. They

showed no signs of confusion, hesitation, or emotion. I heard ear-piercing monster screams from the horde. It was almost as if I was watching the final decisive battle between kaiju at the end of a monster movie.

I sent out more tentacles snapping irregularly like whips through the air for a second wave.

“Berserk.”

The crazed monsters began to fight among themselves once more.

“Grhaaa!”

The monsters watched as their brethren lost their minds and turned and attacked them. Some fell into confusion, but they soon started fighting for their lives.

Kill or be killed...

I pointed at the grisly scene spread out before me.

“Go on then—fight to your hearts’ content. Kill each other to survive.”

I sped Slel on faster as I stared back at the monsters. The pounding of her eight hooves grew louder.

They kept coming. One, then another made it through. Then dozens and dozens of them, despite the berserkers in their midst.

“Well... Not going to be that easy, huh?”

The humanoid types were especially fierce, striking down and crushing my tentacles, even taking out some of the weaker monsters with their attacks.

“Ueh! Ueh, Ueh! Goooh!”

The fire-breathing humanoid types in front began to burn away the tentacles, seemingly paying no attention to the monsters caught in their crossfire.

“Tch... The ones in the front have figured out the range on my attacks already.”

They know when to attack my tentacles. Some of those humanoid monsters are smart...some are even protecting the golden-eyed monsters. They aren't the same type of monsters, so it can't be an emotional instinct to protect their own. They're keeping them as disposable pawns to shield

themselves later, or to distract me. Using any means necessary—cold, emotionless, calculating decision-making.

“Well...” Behind my mask, I couldn’t repress a smirk. “In your position, I’d do the same thing.”

Right, then—next strategy. I can’t keep fighting the same way forever.

I sent out a third round of new tentacles. There was no real change in the number of monsters in their front line. More and more just kept reinforcing from the back.

Fine... I’ll aim for the flanks.

They were recent additions to the frontline—monsters I hadn’t seen before.

“Paralyze.”

“Hye?! Hye?!?”

The monster screamed, and I saw a change come across the horde. They knew that when the tentacles got close, they started to attack their own, but now, several of their kind had stopped moving completely.

That unexpected development caused them to stop for a moment.

Show them a pattern, then subvert their expectations—the more the better. This technique is used in martial arts, sports, and even stand-up comedy to take your opponent by surprise.

The golden-eyed monsters took no time in regaining their ferocious aggression, however. I only managed to buy myself a few seconds of relief before the paralyzed monsters were brutally and helplessly crushed beneath the advancing horde.

Hmm, the humanoid monsters at the front that know how to deal with my tentacles...and they’re all still alive.

I turned around on Sleis’s back to face forward. Nothing had changed about the forest we raced through. I tried to visualize my current location.

Trees, trees, more trees... Looks like this is going to continue for a while. At least the monsters should be away from Seras and the others by now.

Slei and I continued, breaking thin branches on the forest floor below.

“All the noise is drawing more and more of them in.”

They weren't just behind me anymore—the monsters were closing in on me from other directions too.

Just when I'd spent time gathering them all up into a single group, I was going to be surrounded.

A flaw in my plan, huh.

I had intended to fire my skills backward to slow them while moving away from the horde, then pull away. I could hide once I had enough distance on them, then group back up with Seras once this was all over. But now I considered abandoning this plan.

I want to avoid mid-to-close-range combat with the horde, but it looks like I have no choice. Unless I find a place to break through somewhere...

“Piggymaru, Sleii... Are you two okay to keep going?”

Both answered with a short affirmative.

They're both pushing themselves though, I can tell. How long will they last, I wonder?

“Hmm?”

I checked my status screen.

This is bad. That's really low.

A light rain started to fall, then the ominous clouds finally burst, and the rain grew faster, heavier, and louder. It struck against the canopy above like tiny spears. The sound dulled my hearing and my sense of how far away the approaching monsters were.

I stopped Sleii and she shook her head, sending a spray of water up into the air. Droplets formed on the feelers of my fly mask, dripping steadily.

I heard the footsteps coming from all directions now.

My vision was obscured by the heavy curtain of rain, but I could see clods of mud being thrown up in the distance. From inside my mask, I watched water pour to the ground in an endless cycle.

I can't fight without linking up with Piggymaru. But when we're linked it uses up my MP so quickly. Even with my mana reserves, I could only manage 30 minutes of battle. But there's no time to sleep.

I need to level up.

Those humanoid monsters have a lot of EXP. If I can keep killing them, and continually level up during combat...

This is so reckless. It'll put me in danger, and I won't be able to keep a safe distance. And I can't collect EXP from monsters if they die when I'm too far away.

"Then I'll need to head back a little way..."

I needed to fight a few skirmishes, keep myself at the very edge of the horde to earn more EXP.

"Are you guys willing to come with me?"

"Squee!"

"Snort!"

Piggymaru flailed its tentacles in reply, and Sleil kicked the ground hard with her front hooves.

Neither of them hesitated—I knew they wouldn't. I cracked my neck.

"I'm really glad to have you guys with me."

A sinister group of monsters came charging out of the brush from the direction we'd come. I turned Sleil to face them and looked down at my hands to see they were splattered with mud from the chase. Shaking my palms clean, I glared up at the oncoming monsters.

"Let's go."

Mud splashed underfoot with the thud of every hoof beat of the black horse underneath me, but Sleil's footing was true. Her breath puffed out in white wisps that trailed behind us as we rode. At first the monsters seemed confused as they watched us turn and start riding toward them. Then they gleefully charged as they realized their prey had nowhere to run.

"You like playing with humans that much?"

I turned Sleil to the left—at the same time sending out Piggymaru's tentacles diagonally to the right. The group of monsters changed direction to dodge but kept coming. Some of them slipped spectacularly in the wet mud, rolling over and sending great globs of earth up into the air as they struggled. But the number that fell was tiny compared to the number that kept their feet.

Even just one would be enough.

I think the humanoid monsters see humans as a favorite toy. We're highly intelligent, sometimes pretentious, and high-minded. Sometimes evil—hateful in the things we say. To break us, hurt us, toy with us...the perfect game for them. Maybe they see elves and leopardmen in the same way.

But then, I guess there are humans who treat others like that too.

“Dark.”

A blinded monster lost its footing and rolled over into the mud.

Once I've paralyzed them, it's just a case of how to finish them off. Plenty of extra effects I can add for some finishing touches.

Of all my status effect skills' range and effects, paralyze was the easiest to use. It had the longest range of all of them. But it had one major downside. I had to say the names of my skills at a certain volume for them to activate...and paralyze took longer to say than the others.

I'd tried pronouncing the skill name fast like a tongue twister in the past, but it hadn't activated. I needed to speak clearly and loudly when calling out my skill names, and that made chaining them together rapidly very difficult. That split second difference between how long it took to pronounce my skills could be life or death against these powerful enemies.

That's why...

“Dark.”

I chose a skill that was short and easy to pronounce.

They'd been prepared for Paralyze and Berserk, but suddenly here was something new. They hesitated, and I took their sight. They were confused. They fell. They took others down with them.

Show a pattern, then break it. Slow. Slow. Fast.

This is why I kept Dark back in reserve in the first place. But it can only take away their sight, not kill them.

I kept Sleis galloping, dashing, darting, careening, galloping—at top speed as I fired off as many skills as I could to maintain my range. When I looked back, it was as if the number of monsters behind me hadn't changed a bit. They were finally catching up.

...Just a little further.

I started to notice ripped up trees in the forest as we raced past. We were back in the area our party had all passed through on our

journey. Sleï wheezed now and looked exhausted as we picked up the pace.

That's it. Keep going.

There they are.

In the clearing I saw dozens of monsters that I'd paralyzed earlier. My heart was beating out of my chest.

They're in range.

I saw a humanoid monster among them, frozen to the forest floor.

Must've been late to counterattack because of all the others in its way. Slower than the other monsters, maybe?

No. Who cares? The reason doesn't matter. All that matters is that there's a paralyzed humanoid monster over there.

I quickly took it in—felt the rage, regret, and overwhelming hatred emanating from it.

I don't think that thing's just pretending to be paralyzed. In that case... Go ahead and die for me.

“Berserk.”

The effect compelled the humanoid monster in front of me and all those caught in range behind it. A terrible, hoarse scream assaulted my ears as geysers of blood erupted up into the air, falling back down like red rain on the forest below.

Level up!

Level 1903 → Level 1921

Sleï sped on like a black bullet, bathing us in the bloody shower as she raced past the paralyzed monsters. I checked my stats—my MP had completely recovered.

This light on the back of Sleï's neck is getting weaker. It's been bothering me for a while now. Seems like her third stage of transformation constantly uses up mana and she needs more to keep going.

I poured more mana into the crystal, and Sleï's speed increased a little. Then I leaned down and brought my face close to her ear to give her orders.

“Now it’s time for the real thing. Can you keep this up a little longer?”

“Snort!”

I lightly stroked the back of her neck.

Piggymaru and Sleir were ready, but I planned to send them to escape if the worst happened. On their own, they might be able to blend in with the horde and get away.

Poke.

One of Piggymaru’s hardened tentacles tapped me hard on the shoulder.

“Hmm?”

“Squee!”

It sounded almost as if the little slime was reprimanding me.

Did it sense what I was thinking?

I softly caught a tentacle and stroked it with three fingers to reassure Piggymaru.

“You understand, right? What kind of person would I be if I stopped you from being bullied only to let you die here?”

“Squ.”

I snorted at that. “Dummy. I don’t plan on dying here, either.”

“Sque?”

“I was just planning ahead—one possibility of many. And hey... I can’t die until I see that foul Goddess begging for mercy with tears in her eyes now, can I?”

“Squee!”

Just then, Piggymaru gave a start, and signaled to me.

The slime had been tapping my back for some time now, using the tentacles it grew from my neck to tell me the location of nearby monsters.

“They’re close.”

I can’t dodge them. I can’t run anymore.

I looked up at the sky.

This heavy rain might be more of a blessing than a curse. It'll wash away our scent and make us harder to track. This strategy is going to rely on hit and run tactics, coming in fast and picking them off one by one.

I brought Sleil around. The way in which her eight legs moved was a wonder to behold and she could turn incredibly quickly.

Makes her an ace at evading attacks.

I caught my breath. Expending this much mana took a toll on me, but this wasn't a time to let fatigue win.

"I have more than enough MP and this is a fight to the death."

The monsters' screams echoed through the forest over the beat of Sleil's hooves as they pounded the rain-soaked mud beneath us. The black horse galloped swift and hard through the piercing curtain of rain lashing down from the sky. I had to tear off leaves that stuck to my mask as we rode.

The area around me was a confused mess of a battle. Because of my hit-and-run attack, the monster horde had scattered somewhat. As I appeared before them, only to disappear into the woods seconds later, the monsters began to mill around in frustration. The status effect skills I fired off as I ran also seemed to be restraining them.

The monsters with the stronger presences had stopped trying to approach me, but I was still very much surrounded. In the heavy rain, I was now finally losing the ability to properly detect where the monsters had positioned themselves. I found an area of heavy brush as I rode.

Might be a good place to hide... But I don't think I can wait them out.

Rain continued to fall, beating heavily on the leaves around me with no sign of stopping.

I was winded and small scratches ran across the backs of my hands.

Must've cut them on some branches as I was riding. In all this thicket, the smallest scratches are the wor—

That presence! Are they humanoid types? Yes. Two big ones, approaching from behind.

"Gruaah!" another monster screamed as it leapt out at me from the bushes.

It caught me off guard while I was distracted by the two that were

behind me.

“Snort!” Sleil reared up on her hind legs and swung a giant hoof down on the monster’s face, crushing its head completely. Then she hit the ground running, speeding through the forest faster than before.

“Good job.”

“Snort!”

She leapt from the brush, two mid-sized humanoid types not too far behind us. Leaping from her back, I rolled into the bushes and dropped to a knee before they noticed me. I combined Piggymaru’s tentacles into one long strand and sent it circling toward the two monsters’ backs before it forked into two tentacles at the tip.

Took them by surprise while they kept following Sleil. Now they’re in range, and I’m faster.

“Paralyze.”

Apparently, some of these humanoid types weren’t all that smart after all. I walked over to the two paralyzed monsters and finished them off with my Berserk skill.

Level up!

Level 1921 → Level 1929

My MP, which had been down to less than half, was completely restored. Even though I’d fired off a few volleys of poison earlier, the fastest way I had to kill was my Paralyze and Berserk combo.

I mounted Sleil when she returned.

I don’t know the exact distance, but...they’re still coming for me. Advancing slowly, though.

My breathing was shallow, my body overheated—I was pushing myself too hard. I’d been treading a very fine line ever since I started fighting the powerful creatures that lurked in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters. One wrong step, and I would be eaten alive.

I spurred Sleil on quickly, feeling the presence of the monsters getting further away.

First I need to find a way to break through the ones surrounding me,

and th—

“Slei, keep your head low!” I shouted, pulling myself down close to her flank and out of sight. Just then, something whooshed overhead.

“Ah?!”

It almost looked like...a huge scythe.

Just ahead was a line of trees, torn to shreds. They toppled in our path, and Slei had to duck, leap and dodge left and right to avoid them.

Something cut them all down.

“Gyorrhiii—”

I turned in the direction of the cry to see a huge monster wailing in the distance, its arms like tentacles with scythe blades on the ends. Through the rain, I could only make out the monster’s silhouette.

“It got me from all the way back there?!”

We raced through the forest, now seeing monsters all around us that had been cut cleanly in two. The rain was washing blood from the corpses. A human-like shape of a monster staggered through the blood, its head missing and red liquid gushing from the wound.

“Squee!”

Another scythe was flying toward us—this time, I was ready.

“I see it...”

I ducked down to dodge, just as I’d done earlier, and was trying to get a better look at the double-scythed monster, when a massive humanoid type appeared suddenly before us. It stood like a man on two legs, with thick lips and a huge mouth that seemed to be permanently wailing. The nails on its fingertips were ragged but razor-sharp, and it had thick body hair that squirmed and writhed like a sea of worms.

“Ugh. Another one.”

Seras would faint if she saw that.

“Ugurgegaah!”

“Gyuruh?! Gyuruh?! Gyoh...”

For some reason, it attacked the double-scythed monster instead of me. It charged, leaping to sink its teeth into the scythe monster’s shoulder. Looking closer, I could see the human monster was bleeding from below an arm.

“Ahh, I get it... Not happy about the friendly fire, huh.”

The double-scythed monster was steadily devoured as the humanoid creature pressed the attack. The monster’s cries began to weaken and I breathed a sigh of relief.

“I’ll take the good luck. Paralyze.”

The two of them hadn’t noticed my approach, as I hid myself from them until the last moment.

“Hgyeh?!”

“Gyorhh...?!”

Two dogs fighting over a bone, while I run away with the prize.

“Sorry, you’re just more EXP to add to the pile.”

I cast Berserk on them both. Blood spurted from both their bodies, as I continued past them.

Level up!

Level 1929 → Level 1966

I was pretty winded by this point. Leveling up restored my MP, but it didn’t stop me from getting tired. On top of that, my link with Piggymaru was only supposed to last through very short combat encounters. It was taking a toll on my body.

“Eh?”

I saw shadows moving beyond the fallen trees, the horde advancing on me, drawn by the cries of the two monsters I’d just slain.

Or maybe it was the gruesome blood spraying up into the air. Or maybe they were waiting for me to weaken all along, licking their lips in anticipation.

I sensed the sadistic glee of a monster closing in on its prey.

The air had turned cold—I could see the white clouds of my breath each time I panted. I checked my stat screen, not really knowing the reason why.

Tooka Mimori

Lv. 1966

HP: + 5898 MP: + 64478 / 64878

Attack: + 5898 Defense: + 5898 Vitality: + 5898

Speed: + 5898 Intelligence: + 5898

Title: E-class Hero

E-class hero... That ridiculous title is what started all this.

I urged Sleil on faster, split Piggymaru's tentacles as wide as I could manage, then sent them all flying toward the monster horde.

With this stupid, ridiculous power of mine...

"...I'm going to annihilate everything. I'm going to slaughter every last one of you!"

SOGOU AYAKA

IT ALL HAPPENED SO SUDDENLY.

The cacophony of monster screams echoed through the forest, shrill and overlapping...getting closer and closer. The thundering footsteps came ever nearer—endless pounding in the distance that rumbled the very ground underfoot.

"Igieeeh!"

A huge monster appeared, knocking down trees in its path. It was followed closely by smaller and mid-sized monsters. Sogou Ayaka quickly grasped the situation. It wasn't just happening here—in another area of the forest, a great horde was on the move.

What's happening? They seem to be going somewhere.

There were some monsters that stopped to look at Ayaka and her group, but most just continued on their way, as if they were being lured by something, compelled to focus in one direction.

It's like someone is calling them... Should we hide and try to wait this out?

Ayaka pointed to the trees and gave the order.

“Everyone, get over there! Suou-san! Take the lead!” she shouted.

Getting away from that horde is our top priority. I can't let them notice us.

Her strategy was ultimately successful. Some of the monsters broke off to pursue them, but she forced them to the ground without difficulty. After a while, the sound of the stampede passed, and her group had all survived safely.

The others, however...

“No! It can't be...” Ayaka's voice was hollow.

Two male 2-C students had died—one trampled into the earth by one of the huge monsters as it passed, the other ravaged by a mid-sized monster that had found his hiding place. Both had been from Yasu Tomohiro's group.

Ayaka bit her lip and ran over to Yasu, who was standing over the corpses.

“Yasu-kun...”

“Eh? Oh, it's you Ayaka,” he said lightly.

The two corpses were lined up side-by-side, cloth covering their faces. Ayaka didn't have the courage to check who they were. She might not have been able to bear the heavy reality that would bring.

My classmates are dead.

When Mimori Touka died it didn't feel this real—Ayaka hadn't even seen the moment he was transported down into the ruins, but she knew was dead.

She pushed down her hesitation—a knot in her stomach—and took a closer look to identify her fallen comrades.

“Hirooka-kun and Sakuma-kun, they... Didn't get away?”

“Guess so, yeah.”

“—Eh? Yasu-kun, y-you mean they weren't with you?”

“You have to protect yourself. I was thinking about the future—we can't have the small number of elites exposing themselves to unnecessary risk out here,” he said, looking down at his classmates' corpses and shaking his head wearily. “I shouldn't even need to say this,

but it's their own fault they couldn't get away."

He wasn't shaken by their deaths at all. Ayaka looked at the other heroes in Yasu's group, all handling the shock in their own way. Their leader, however, looked aloof and bored.

"Sh-shouldn't even...? These two were a part of your group, Yasu-kun! You didn't help them when the monster horde came?!"

"...What are you trying to say, Ayaka?"

"Y-you're an A-class!"

"So what?"

She drew closer to him. "You have the responsibility to protect the people in your group! Don't you understand that?!"

As soon as she said it, Ayaka felt a strange sense of regret welling up inside—what she'd said had been so typically 'the straight-A student' way of looking at things. But she couldn't keep the words from coming out.

"The students in your group rely on you, Yasu-kun. You have to protect them."

Yasu's group was filled with students who couldn't make it into Kirihara's or Asagi's. Like Sogou Ayaka's group, the students in his group had also been treated with hostility by the Goddess and Kirihara. Fearing the backlash, those who joined Yasu's group had nowhere else to turn.

But—is it right for me to blame Yasu Tomohiro for this?

Ayaka doubted herself, her head full of questions. The students in his group were only there by process of elimination. But even so, she wanted him to protect them. She had called them to her own side, but they hadn't listened—and so...

"You're the only one that can protect them, Yasu-kun." That was all she could muster.

Yasu suddenly grabbed her by the shoulder.

"Shhh," he started to speak, looking down at the ground.

"Yasu-kun...?"

"Shut up! Shut up, shut up, shut up! Shut up, Ayakaaa!" His hand gripped her shoulder so hard, it hurt.

...Eh?

“Wh-what is it with you?! Huh?! Still looking down on me?! You still think you’re above me?! Don’t you get it?!” He raised his head, his expression twisted and demented. “We’re practically the same now, you and I!”

“Wh-what are you saying...?” Ayaka was taken aback.

“This is how it goes, huh? Sogou Ayaka always just naturally looks down on people, without a second freakin’ thought! Don’t you!”

“Wait? Wh-what are you saying? I just meant to suggest you should protect them, that’s all I—”

“Who cares?” Yasu screamed, interrupting her. “Who freakin’ cares if Hirooka and Sakuma live or die! Huh?! Why’ve I gotta be the one to save them anyway?! I’m strong—that’s how I survived! They’re weak—that’s why they’re freakin’ dead! Simple, right?!”

“But those with power have a responsibility to—”

“Aaahhh! Where’s the law that says that in this world?! There you go again, see? Declaring yourself in that ‘those with power’ group without a second thought! That’s what I’m talkin’ about, Ayaka! Playing the saint! Looking down on me without even realizing it! Little Miss Good Intentions pointing out how much better she is than everybody else! Don’t even think, do you? Stop it already, just stop!”

“I-I’m no saint, and I’m not looking down on you Yasu-kun. And you’re misunderstanding me! I’m asking the people who have whatever it is I lack to help, so we can support each other...” Ayaka argued with sincerity. “There are things only I can do, and things only you can do too, Yasu-kun. The same is true for all of us! You’re an elite hero, aren’t you? There must have been something you could’ve done! That’s why I —”

“D-doesn’t matter if Hirooka and Sakuma die anyway, does it?! You probably didn’t hear, did you? Goddess took you out before you heard... When that freakin’ weakling Mimori was sent to hell, these two were cheering her on, y’know?! Behind my back, they were always making fun of me too!” Yasu descended into a fit of manic laughter. “Karma is what I call it! This whole world works on karma! Am I wrong?! You’re telling me a class rep born in the lap of luxury in a noble family is gonna show compassion to a couple guys like this?!”

“I don’t know what you’re thinking, Yasu-kun! But there’s nobody here who deserves to die. I...”

I swore I wouldn’t let anyone die... That I would protect them. Because that’s what the strong are supposed to do.

“Weak.”

It was Kirihara Takuto.

“K-Kirihara...” Yasu looked dismayed.

“Yasu... Do you know about character?” Kirihara looked at Ayaka, then back to Yasu, watching for a reaction—like he was trying to figure him out.

“My father’s buddies used to come for weekend house parties a lot... This amazing guy who made it big trading cryptocurrency—he’s the one who told me about character.”

Ayaka couldn’t tell what Kirihara was getting at.

“Humans all have some sort of character, you know? But some of us got more character than others—so if someone succeeds in life, that means they had enough strength of character to get the job done, got it? Unless you’ve got the strength of character, you’ll never have lasting success.”

Kirihara brought his hair down onto his forehead and smoothed it out.

“You follow? Keeping up? I’m saying that guys who succeed in life just ’cause they get lucky—they never get rid of that loser stink, no matter how high they rise.”

Kirihara sighed.

“He told me how pathetic it was to watch people struggling along, not having the strength of character to get above their station—they just can’t handle it. Those losers don’t even realize how pathetic they look. They get big ideas about making friends with the elites of the world, but to those with strength of character...well, they just look like deluded little nobodies. Sometimes those sorts of losers get mixed up in investment parties full of businesspeople, y’know?”

“What are you tryna say?” said Yasu, grinding his teeth.

“Even your reaction proves you’re a nobody, Yasu. Acknowledge it, already. You and I are worlds apart, there’s no other way to say it.”

In the next moment, Kirihara's hand was on his sword, elegantly twirling it through the air and aiming the point toward Yasu's nose.

"Eh?" Yasu took a step back.

"The classmate of mine on the other end of this blade... That person is a loser. It's high time you grasped the extent of your own station in life, Yasu."

Sweat rolled down Yasu's forehead as Kirihara pressed on.

"That show you put on just now perfectly captures how paper-thin your pathetic character is. Wailing at Sogou like that...indefensible. Truly the act of a complete and irredeemable nobody."

Suddenly, Oyamada Shougo, who'd been standing behind Kirihara, burst out laughing.

"Pff, ha ha! Yasu's stock price just crashed! That's hilarious! I wanted to let you keep living the freakin' delusion a little longer, though! But you got so full of yourself, Takuto had ta take you down a peg! Er, so like, now what? You gonna try playin' it cool? Y-y-you're like totally pathetic! All the time!"

"Shougo... Those pathetic jabs are bringing your rank down as well, you know," said Kirihara.

"Yeah yeah, I'll be careful. Jeez, you're a tough critic, Takuto."

Kirihara flicked his wrist, deftly twirling his sword through the air.

"Some self-awareness would do you good, Yasu," he said, returning his blade to its scabbard with a clink. "No matter how much power you obtain, you don't have the strength of character to hold true, fearsome power."

Yasu was staring at the ground, trembling. His fists were clenched tight, and his breathing was rough, panting heavily, his shoulders rising up and down.

Kirihara didn't seem interested in anything he was doing though, continuing to smooth out his bangs with his fingertips.

"Being deemed an A-class must have caused you to misunderstand, and while I'm not entirely unsympathetic—"

"Screw you, Kirihara." Yasu's face twisted as he spoke.

"Lævateinn." Black fire rose from his back, and Ayaka

instinctively started to retreat.

Oyamada looked uncomfortably at the menacing black flames blazing furiously behind him. “Huh? You wanna go, Yasu? You snap, or what? Jeez, you’re annoying. Seriously, so freakin’ annoying.”

Kirihara on the other hand was completely still—watching Yasu, expressionless and silent, not even drawing his sword.

Yasu stepped forward, bringing his face in close to Kirihara’s, challenging him.

“You’re the one that doesn’t get it. What’s with that attitude anyway? You that pissed I took your kill earlier? Huh? That why you’re steppin’ to me?”

Kirihara looked down at the ground. “Hopelessly pathetic after all, Yasu Tomohiro.”

“Don’t get the wrong idea because you’re an S-class. You haven’t realized it yet, have you Kirihara Takuto.” Yasu pointed a finger to the side—directly at Ayaka.

...Eh? M-me?!

“Some S-class heroes can’t even learn unique skills, even when the rest of them do. Look at Ayaka, she’s proof enough of that! On the other hand, there are B-class heroes like Asagi with skills that surpass Oyamada’s. You get what I’m saying?”

Kirihara didn’t answer, looking dispassionately at Ayaka without moving his head. Yasu twisted his lips into an unsightly grin, baring his teeth.

“What I’m saying is: your rank means nothing. You think you’re better than me just because you’re an S-class? What a pathetic, loser way of thinking! Almost as pathetic as the way you offered up that kill, leaving yourself wide open! You’ll find out who’s really got strength of character,” Yasu declared, moving in closer. “Someday, I’m gonna show it to you!”

Oyamada stepped forward—there was a cold cruelty in his eyes.

“Takuto, I’m gonna crush this guy with a bullet. He’s gone way too far. I’m a good guy, yeah, but he’s finally pissin’ me off.”

Yasu turned on his heels and began to walk away. “Whatever.”

“Y-you...!”

“Leave it, Shougo,” said Kirihara, stopping Oyamada as he went to charge after him.

“Huh?! Why?! You ain’t scared, are you?!”

“Hmm?”

“Ah... Nah, I mean... Sorry man, I... Oof!” Oyamada grunted as Kirihara jabbed him in the stomach with his elbow.

“Responding to his provocations like that makes you just as bad as he is. The smallest dogs bark the loudest.” Kirihara glanced at Ayaka.

“I might agree with him that one of the S-class heroes is dragging the rest of us down. Not living up to the S-class name affects the morale of everyone here. You had better grasp your position soon, Sogou.”

Ayaka didn’t know how to respond to that.

He’s right... I’m not strong enough yet...

She looked down at the corpses of her two classmates.

The heavy, low-hanging clouds rumbled overhead. Kirihara walked past Ayaka, and Oyamada soon followed—she didn’t say a word. Kirihara seemed uninterested in her now.

“Now we’ve got a deluded idiot like Yasu around—” He muttered as he ran his fingers roughly through his hair. “I’ll have to show these idiots true power in a way they can understand...”



Minamino Moe approached Ayaka sheepishly.

“S-sorry, Ayaka-chan... W-we couldn’t do anything to help you...”

She feels bad that she wasn’t able to say something to Yasu when he was speaking so harshly about me, does she?

“It’s okay. It makes me happy just to know you wanted to help.”
Ayaka did her best to return a reassuring smile.

“Man, Kirihara and Yasu-kun are really gettin’ at each other’s throats, huh? Guess they ain’t gonna be gettin’ along any time soon! Figured as much.”

“A-Asagi-san,” said Ayaka, addressing Ikusaba by her first name.

Ikusaba Asagi joined the conversation unexpectedly. Another member of Asagi’s group came out from the brush, and ran up to her leader.

“Hey, Asagi! Can’t find Pidgey anywhere!”

“Eh? Seriously?”

“Super serious.”

Ayaka looked at Asagi’s group carefully.

She isn’t there. Kashima Kobato’s gone.

“What happened to Kashima-san?!” Ayaka turned her eyes to Mamiya Seiko, looking for an explanation.

“We lost some people in that big kaiju stampede, y’know. And like, Kobato ran off saying she’d go find them...”

Mamiya already sounded bored by the subject. She turned to her friend, Kanou Isuzu and motioned for her to continue the story.

“Oh... yeah, like...listen? So, she was crying out calling my name like super loud, y’know! I thought it’d be a good chance to like...use her as a decoy and sneak away! ♪ Heh heh! ♪” Kanou gave a little laugh, sticking out her tongue.

“Wh—” Ayaka could scarcely believe her ears.

“I-I mean...like, the monsters are super scary!” shouted Kanou, her expression flipping suddenly before Ayaka could even speak.

“They were like huge, you know! Eh? What?! Class rep, y-you’re blaming me for this?! What the heck’s wrong with you?! You’re so

mean!” Kanou began to sob. “So mean... Ayaka you’re so mean... Seiko...”

She buried herself in Mamiya’s chest. It started to feel to Ayaka that the students in Asagi’s group were blaming her for this.

“C’mon, Ayaka, aren’t you being a bit rough?” asked Mamiya, as other members of Asagi’s group chimed in.

“Everyone’s gotta protect their own lives first, yeah?!”

“Isuzu wasn’t wrong to do what she did!”

“Listen, we all waited, Ayaka! What’s some class rep born with a silver spoon in her mouth know about what we feel anyway?!”

Ayaka bore it all—what’s done was done.

“Asagi-san,” she said

“Yeah?”

She’s the one who can convince them.

“Let’s go search for her.”

“Right, gotcha. Well, good luck!” Asagi said with a wave.

“What? No. I...I thought we’d go together...”

“Eh? Nah. Like, the Four Holy Elders are back from their search already, and y’know. It’d be like...dangerous to go out any further, right? I’m just being realistic is all.”

“B-but Kashima-san is your friend, isn’t she?!”

“Whatevs, freakin’ die already, will ya?” Asagi’s eyes were suddenly hard, emotionless, and cold—but after that outburst, she quickly flipped back to her easygoing self. “Nyah hah, that was a joke, c’mon! Don’t like, actually die on me! Totally kidding! What’cha think, good impression of the Goddess when she gets pissed? She like really doesn’t like you does she?! You should totally come to us and talk about her! Come complain! I’m serious!”

“B-but about Kashima-san, we need to—”

“Nah, that ain’t gonna happen. I like didn’t wanna lose her either. It hurts, y’know...but there are monsters out there, yeah? You wanna put the rescue team in danger like that?”

“But if we move fast we might be able to—”

“It’s us or Kobato. There’s your tradeoff, and I just think we’ve gotta give up. I mean, personally...like I would love to go and search, you know? But...thinking about it rationally, shouldn’t we leave this to those Four Holy Elders and Nyantan? They know more about this world than we do, yeah? But like, this is just my opinion, y’know. Don’t worry, I’m not gonna push it on you or anything...”

“...”

Ayaka was speechless.

Then I’ll find her on my own.

But the Four Holy Elders would deny that request if she asked.

The Takao sisters are missing too... Come to think of it, I actually haven’t seen them for quite some time. Where have they gone, I wonder?

In the end, the Four Holy Elders and Nyantan managed to gather all the heroes back together, except for Kashima Kobato and the Takao sisters.

“Before the sun goes down, we’ll conduct one last search,” Agit told them. Ayaka daringly volunteered to join them, but they turned her down.

But the search never happened. Nyantan announced a lockdown due to something strange going on in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters today.

Ayaka reflected back on how the eldest daughter of the Four Holy Elders had spoken to her.

“We’re just stronger than you are. Ah... Look sorry, I’m going to make this simple, okay? You’d get in our way. I know you’re getting stronger and all that, but... You gotta look after yourself.”

Ayaka leaned against a tree trunk, feeling helpless. The low clouds rumbled and it began to rain.

“...Status open.”

Ayaka Sogou

Lv. 143

HP: +1935 MP: +3178

Attack: + 20483 Defense: + 2862 Vitality: + 3331

Speed: + 1611 < +500 > Intelligence: + 1712

Title: S-class Hero

Her stats shone bright and clear through the rain as she blankly stared at the screen. She gripped her spear tightly, feeling disheartened.

I'm still so weak. Nobody's going to listen to the powerless. I can't get through to any of them. I have to get stronger. Stronger than anyone else. Stronger, stronger, stronger! Stronger, so I can protect everyone...

KASHIMA KOBATO

KASHIMA KOBATO RAN through the violent, pounding rain. Huge droplets crashed into the leaves and branches above, thundering in her ears. Even that sound struck terror into her heart now. She stopped, placing both hands on her knees as she quickly looked back over her shoulder and panted from the stress.

Did I get away?!

She had met several monsters in the forest but managed to somehow escape them each time. She had been so concentrated on her escape, though, that she'd completely lost sight of the way back. Her eyes dropped to the shortsword at her belt.

I was marking the trees for a while, but...

...But after coming across monsters in the forest, that tactic was quickly forgotten.

I hope Kanou-san is okay...

Sogou Ayaka always said she wanted everyone to make it back to the old world safe and sound, and Kobato wanted to help.

Sakura-san managed to keep her hand with the goddess' help, after all. Nobody from our class has died yet. We're all still alive.

Her hand moved to her mouth in reflexive shock.

"No, that's not right..."

Mimori Touka.

Everybody had forgotten about him, likely because of how little presence he had in the class to begin with. Nobody had seen him die either, only watched him teleported away into the Ruins of Disposal. There was no real sense that he was dead among her classmates...

Kobato thought about why it was that she had run off to find Kanou Isuzu in the first place.

I couldn't save Mimori Touka when he was sent to the Ruins of Disposal. I was scared, I froze up.

She had been tormented by feelings of guilt, night after night ever since then. Her chest was filled with fear and anxiety.

I can't forgive myself. I was so weak. But... But now...I have to get back to the others.

But...I'll die out here!

The fear of death clawed away at her good intentions. When she had first seen the monsters in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters up close, she experienced a fresh kind of shock. The feeling of despair when the horde charged past—the thunderous roars and cries, the way it felt like they pressed down on her from all sides—she had wanted to put her hands over her ears and curl up into a ball right then and there.

But that would've been the death of her. Most of the horde rushed past, but some of the smaller monsters had broken off, and were still lurking in the forest around her.

I wonder if they're looking for me. Maybe I shouldn't move around too much. I really am no good at any of this.

Kobato's thoughts were scattered, and she was losing more confidence by the second.

I'm not like Sogou-san. But I want to be helpful...To help people. Help her, even at a terrible time like this!

She heard a low, muffled growl and her whole body was trembling—her legs cramped up, unable to move.

The growl clearly hadn't been human.

A beast, or...

It had been so fearsome she'd heard it even through the pounding rain.

She smelled blood in the air.

I have to hide! I have to run!

A dark shadow emerged from the bushes.

“Graaah...”

She couldn't believe it was so close already—she hadn't felt its presence. Kobato sank to the ground. Trembling, she raised her head to look up at it.

“Ah!” she gasped.

Seeing the reality before her, she was plunged into complete despair. What stood before her...

“Wh-what's a human doing in a place like this?”

A humanoid monster with a leopard's head...and it was talking to her.

EVE SPEED

“**E**VE...WHAT DID YOU JUST SAY?”

They were in the small cave as torrential rain still fell heavily outside. Water splashed down on the rock near the entrance.

“I'm going after Too-ka,” said Eve again.

Lis looked up at her uneasily but didn't say a word. Seras Ashrain watched her closely to determine if she was serious.

“But Sir Too-ka told us to wait here.” Seras's expression was hard, her beautiful white legs drawn up neatly before her as she sat on the floor of the cave.

“Let me go, Seras.”

“Then explain why you wish to go.”

“Hmph,” growled Eve. “That's unexpected. I thought you'd be more stubborn. Scold me and say Too-ka's orders are absolute or something.”

“I once belonged to a band of knights. I could not have fulfilled my duties then, nor now, by blindly refusing to listen to my fellow warriors. I will hear what you have to say.”

Eve looked out at the raging wind and rain outside.

“There are too many of them. There aren’t just one or two of those humanoid monsters out there.”

“You mean to say that even with Sir Too-ka’s abilities, he might not survive out there?”

“He might survive. He’s not the kind of man to fight when there’s no chance of success. But it’s hard to imagine he won’t get hurt.”

Seras couldn’t argue with that. Eve’s eyes narrowed.

“And he isn’t exactly in the best fighting condition right now.”

“He has stat modifiers from all his leveling, so that shouldn’t be a problem—” But even as she spoke, Seras was realizing something.

“You’ve seen it, too. Ever since we entered the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters, Too-ka hasn’t been sleeping,” said Eve.

“...I know.”

“He’s been spending so much time trying to draw out Piggymaru’s powers with trial and error, creating forbidden items and taking extra turns at the watch. And I—this is just a guess—but I think he’s been casting his Sleep skill on us without our knowledge.”

“You mean he’s been extending our sleep with his skills?” Seras placed her fingers to her lips in surprise.

“Yeah. To keep us rested.”

“Sir Too-ka has clearly been mindful of how much mental stress we’ve been under for some time now, but...”

“In this land crawling with monsters, it’s hard to get a good night’s sleep. All we would usually manage would be a few hours of shallow rest. That’s why Too-ka has been using his skills on us—to help us sleep better.”

This is the only reason why I have been able to sleep so deeply ever since we entered this place. Eve thought to herself. Even Lis, who should be the least adapted to this place, has been able to sleep here. He really has been secretly putting us to sleep with his skill.

“He’s been cutting down on his own hours of sleep to give them to us this whole time,” said Seras.

“That’s how I see it... And it’s brought us this far.”

“And Sir Too-ka has...” Seras trailed off.

“Hmph? What is it?”

“I-It’s nothing. Anyway, what you were saying. If you intend to go, then time is of the essence.”

Eve grunted and nodded. She was grateful for Seras’s calm and collected attitude in times like these.

“Even with those stat modifiers, he isn’t fighting at his best right now. He isn’t invincible. It’s possible he might get gravely injured and lose the ability to move.”

Seras couldn’t argue with that either, though it appeared that she wanted to. “Do you intend to go alone?”

“I wasn’t bluffing earlier—those monsters could easily see me as one of their kind and let me pass. I’m used to moving in this terrain, suppressing my presence, and staying hidden.”

Eve shifted her gaze to look back outside.

“It’ll be night soon. I won’t need to use any lights that might give me away.”

“I see you aren’t lying just to try to convince me,” stated Seras.

It’s easier to convince someone when you’re just being honest with them. Just like Too-ka said.

Eve was impressed by his insight.

“And well... If Too-ka and Slel are injured, I’m the only one who could carry them to safety.”

Raw strength was not Seras’s strong point. She turned her gaze to the cave floor and thought quietly for a few moments.

Eventually, she looked up, opening her eyes wide. Her eyes were as clear as the blue sky on a cloudless day as she looked at Lis.

“We cannot leave Lis alone—Sir Too-ka would not allow that. So... I will remain here with her.”

“Thanks, Seras,” Eve said sincerely.

“But do you believe you can catch up with him?”

“He’ll leave marks in the forest as he rides. You know all about those, right?”

Beast tracks, torn bark, ripped up leaves, broken branches, scattered earth, chipped stones... There are countless signs in the forest for those who know where to look.

“After a stampede like that, there’ll be tracks, even in the rain. If Too-ka’s out there fighting them, that’ll make him all the easier to find.”

“Sir Too-ka made Lady Slei familiar with our scents so she could return to us. How will you find your way back?”

Eve pointed to her temple. “I’ve got the map and rough distances right here. I’ll leave a trail of marks as I travel, too.”

Seras’s expression relaxed a little after hearing that.

“I understand—you aren’t simply acting out of impatience. I see that now,” she said.

“I owe you one.”

“...And I’m sorry.”

“Eh?”

“I apologize for testing you like that. I’m supposed to be ‘vice-captain’ of this group. It’s my responsibility to make these decisions about the safety of our members in Sir Too-ka’s absence.”

Eve gave a short chuckle from the back of her throat. “You really do like him, don’t you?”

“Yes. I have entrusted myself to him completely.”

Eve decided not to press Seras on how far that went, exactly.

“Well, we can’t afford to lose him here.”

We shouldn’t allow the odds of losing him to rise, not even a little.

Eve had no real grounds for believing that—it was just what her gut was telling her. She placed her hand on Lis’s head, who had been sitting quietly listening to every word.

“Do what Seras tells you to, okay?”

“Big Sister...”

Lis took Eve’s hand with both of her own; her small hands shook

until she gripped Eve's tightly.

She was unable to conceal her anxiety. She wanted to beg Eve not to go.

"Please...help Mr. Too-ka," she said.

Torn between Eve's desire to help Too-ka and Seras's longing for her master, and her own selfish need to protect her big sister, Lis decided to be brave. Eve felt sorry for forcing her to face such adult emotions.

"...Lis, I'm sorry."

The small girl nodded, her expression indicating she understood everything. Steeling her resolve, Eve picked up two of her swords, and got to her feet. Seras sat bolt upright and looked over at her.

"Promise me you'll come back to us alive."

"Yes. I'm entrusting you with Lis's care, Seras."

"I'll do whatever is necessary to protect her."

Eve was a little surprised to hear that.

I always remember her saying "even if it costs me my life" or something like that, but... "Whatever is necessary?" Too-ka's rubbing off on her.



Eve Speed left the cave, walking into the pounding rain. She felt a brutal, beastly presence somewhere off in the forest, but it wasn't close. Honing all her senses, she picked out sounds from within that steady drumbeat of rain.

Strong leg muscles clenched and answered her call to action. Hot blood coursed through her veins. Mind and body were both completely ready for battle.

"...Grraauih," she growled, letting out the ferocious beast that dwelled within her once more.

Not since I last stood in the bloodsport arena...

There had been fearsome beasts back then as well.

She shook the heavy raindrops that had collected on her fur to the ground, as if washing away her memories, and gripped a sword in each of her hands.

“I’ll just have to become a beast again, too.”

Eve brought the longsword down as hard as she could, splitting the monster apart and sending the two halves of its corpse spinning through the air. Without stopping to watch the carnage, she tensed her heels then leapt into the air to dodge another monster’s charge. She arced above the monster, flipping the grip of her sword before driving the point into the creature’s skull.

Her blade stuck deep. She placed a foot on the monster’s head and ripped out her sword forcefully. Then she gripped the blood-soaked corpse with one hand, throwing it full force and sending it slamming into the trunk of a tree some distance away. The smell of blood and the noise were a decoy, to draw monsters away.

A cheap trick, but better than nothing.

Eve scanned her surroundings constantly so as not to miss a thing. There were more monsters in the area than she’d imagined possible—likely those had been following Too-ka’s trail. With that many after him, it was tough to think he would be able to hide and just wait them out. Even Eve wasn’t able to avoid engaging with a few of them. She had only encountered mid-sized monsters, so far—none of the larger ones yet.

No time to rest.

Eve got low to the ground on all fours and bounded swiftly through the forest. It was proving easy to track him, at least. Wherever she went, the marks of fierce battle showed her the path which Too-ka had taken. He hadn’t gone in a straight line, and from the looks of his tracks, he hadn’t won every battle. The path began to skew in different directions the further she went.

I’ll find him eventually—I’ll start to hear his voice and feel his presence.

Eve focused herself on a new presence approaching her. It wasn’t Too-ka—it was a monster. It emerged from the trees as she expected, and with one swing Eve sliced the monster clean in two. She then spun,

using the momentum from her swing to throw her other sword into the brush.

“Gh?! Uh, Geh...”

Her sword found its target—another monster which had been lurking in ambush. She rushed toward the wailing creature, stabbing and then pulling her sword from its body as it breathed its last. Heedless of the rain buffeting her from the side, she sprinted off into the forest without pausing for breath as mud splattered out behind her.

In front, she saw a spider type monster in the thick branches of a great tree. She threw her second sword once more, but another creature appeared at her flank. She cut the newcomer down where it stood, not losing any speed. Next, she leaped into the air, grasping and pulling her sword from the spider type monster before landing back on the ground below.

Her momentum carried her forward, sliding along the wet mud, until she kicked hard. Her heels found solid ground beneath the muck, and she set off charging through the forest again. Years spent fighting as a bloodsport warrior had made her strong.

So long as I don't face the humanoid types or the larger ones, I can hold my own out here. I've come a long way since this place forced me to turn tail and run.

“Eh?”

Another monster? No. What is that? There's something different out there.

Too-ka? I wouldn't be able to sense Piggymaru, but I can feel no sense of Sleis's presence. I've got to find out.

Eve sprinted faster, on her way encountering a winged beetle-like monster that she cut down in a flash.

The real problem is up ahead.

She brought herself close to the ground now, concealing her presence as much as physically possible.

What is this presence I feel? It isn't a monster, but it's not exactly Too-ka, either...

The thing in the forest was...fearful.

A non-golden-eyed monster? Rare to come across one here, but not

impossible. This show of fear. It might just leave the area if I reveal myself and growl at it.

Eve jumped out from the brush.

“Graaah...”

“Ah!”

Eve opened her eyes wide.

“What? A human in a place like this?”

To Eve’s surprise, looking up at her now with frightened eyes was a small human girl. The sight of her huddled up like that reminded Eve of Lis—so much so that she instinctively reached out a hand to comfort her, to stroke her head and calm her down. The poor girl was soaked to the bone after all, and looked so weak and helpless. Eve reached out, like she always did, and—

“Lightning Shifter—Unlock One.”

The electricity was on her in an instant, sending off sparks and covering Eve completely. She hadn’t even had a moment to catch her breath before it happened. In the same instant she had been assaulted by another attack—a rapier’s needle like a bee’s stinger thrust toward her. She just barely managed to block the needle with her own blade. After their swords crossed once, the charged individual behind her let out a short gasp of astonishment.

“This thing reacted! Even blocked my freakin’ attack! What the heck?! Hey Aneki, didn’t ya say the only ones that could react to my attacks were just, you know, the Goddess, some S-class heroes, and those famous guys from the other countries?! But like at this distance —!”

“Why you...”

“Unlock Two.”

“Ghh, ah?!” There were violent shocks running through Eve’s whole body.

“You can’t escape my lightning now.”

“Gh, Gah... Ah?!” Her voice was failing her—she couldn’t speak.

“Like, sorry... Aneki says we can’t let Kashima die, y’know.”

Eve looked at the girl who had fired lightning at her—there was

strong aggression in her eyes, but she saw reason there too. Then the soaked and terrified girl finally opened her mouth and managed to speak.

“...Itsuki-san.”

Itsuki? That's the name of this lightning girl?

She looked around, feeling her eyelids spasm and convulse as she did so. The dancing sparks which surrounded her weren't affecting the small girl at all. Eve saw no thunderclouds in the sky, either.

This isn't naturally occurring lightning? Is it magic? No, that can't be it.

Eve searched her memories for a thread of truth that might help her.

The girl with the rapier over there... I see, she's...

Eve had heard from Too-ka of the ones the Goddess had summoned to defeat the source of all evil.

She's a hero from another world.

The lightning girl's rapier was coming closer now, almost at Eve's throat. Cursing her nearly paralyzed body, Eve jumped and somehow dodged out of the way. The girl's attack missed, and the sparks returned, dancing around her.

The lightning breaks off at a certain point. That means its range is limited. It might just get weaker the further I am away from it...

Eve made to step away, trying to put some distance between herself and her attacker. The lightning girl looked shocked.

“No way?! It took a blow from my ‘two’ and it's still moving...?! Listen, I'm not lettin' you off that easy!”

Eve saw that she was shaken, but rather than slowing her attacks, the girl only increased her speed. She closed in on Eve with a swiftness she hadn't witnessed during her time in the bloodsport colosseum, lashing out with her stinger once more. Eve struggled, using both her swords to knock back the storm of rapier needles, unable to move at her full potential due to the lightning that still clung to her.

Gah! If I could just move faster, I...

She watched her opponents' movements carefully, ready to counterattack as soon as the opportunity presented itself. This technique

of reading an enemy's movements and predicting them was only possible because of Eve's experience as a warrior.

The lightning girl's strength was not just in her speed—she clearly had a real talent for battle. Her wild aggression was almost perfectly combined with reasoned skill and technique. It was like nothing Eve had ever seen. Hers was a form not bound by convention but suited to the girl's own individual strengths. She would've complimented the girl on her fighting style in any other situation. And somehow, Eve knew that she was still learning, still improving.

If she decided to fight as a bloodsport warrior, she would rise to the top in the blink of an eye.

"You've gotta be kiddin' me...! Unlock One and Two haven't finished you off?! But like, that's the golden attack pattern that Aneki told me to use?! She's never wrong! So like, that means...I'm just not powerful enough yet!"

The girl continued to press her assault, but her face showed no sign of complacency. All that Eve could see written there was frustration.

She can't attack in the way her this Aneki taught her, and that's making her angry and upset.

She looked to be blaming herself. But still, she didn't give up. Her attacks were becoming more accurate with every blow.

She's the type that grows better in the heat of battle...!

Eve had no room for complacency, either. Inside the web of electricity, she was completely on the defensive. Every time she tried to escape, the lightning girl closed the distance between them in the blink of an eye. She was so fast, that Eve didn't even have the time to indicate surrender by holding up her hands. Her opponent had been attacking continuously and rapidly, never missing a beat.

If I can just hold on long enough to find my voice!

There was a sound—a wet splat.

"—unf."

Eve's attention momentarily shifted to the unexpected source of the sound. It wasn't a monster—but the terrified girl from earlier, now on her knees in the mud. It looked as if she had been coming to help the lightning girl, but had lost strength in her legs along the way and

dropped down into the mire.

“Now I got ya.”

No!

In the moment that Eve was distracted by the fallen girl, her enemy seized the chance to attack. The lightning girl’s eyes showed extreme calm—the concentration needed to claim victory by suppressing her emotions.

I have to dodge her att—

“Wait just a moment, Itsuki.”

The rapier’s point stopped just short of Eve’s throat.

“...I’ve been waiting, Aneki.” The lightning girl—Itsuki—jumped back and stood before her sister, as if shielding her from Eve. Eve now got a good look at her dress.

I think that thing Itsuki is wearing is called a ‘kimono,’ right? I heard those clothes are from the other world, just like katanas are.

It was cut short above the knees, with long sleeves and equipment strapped to the sides—somewhat different from the shape that Eve was familiar with.

It was hard to see her arm movements and read her attacks with those sleeves flying around.

Her older sister’s clothes were similar, but had a different cut.

I think those are called ‘shrine maiden’s clothes,’ aren’t they? They’re from the other world too, I recall.

Her clothes were quite revealing, but clean and neat at the same time—perhaps that was mostly because of the way she carried herself. There was a longsword hanging at her side.

Looks like the shrine maiden is the older sister.

Eve backed away slowly, bringing her body close to the ground—ready for anything. Still, she felt strange about the situation. Itsuki had been mere moments away from victory, but had pulled back without a second thought when ordered, and there was no sign that she resented having done so.

“Kashima-san appears to be safe.”

“Heh... Kinda close call, though.” Itsuki tightened her grip on her

rapier and spoke to her sister without taking her eyes off of Eve.
“Aneki... Do you mind if I ask like why you stopped me from finishing it off?”

“Because that is not a monster.”

“Huh?”

“It’s something different entirely from the other monsters we have faced.”

“What, a female lion?”

“It’s a leopard.”

“Wha? ...A leopard? What’s the difference?”

Her sister only smiled in response, though not mockingly. She then fixed her eyes on Eve, calm and composed.

“The difference is their high levels of intelligence—far above those monsters we’ve fought thus far. The soul that dwells behind those eyes appears closer to human than beast.”

“So like—what are you getting at?” Itsuki swept her soaked hair behind her head.

“We might be able to communicate with it.”

“Ah, I get it... But Aneki, I don’t think it can talk, y’know?”

“Perhaps your unique skill has had some effect on it. Or perhaps it expresses itself with subtle movements rather than sound. I hardly think it wise to decide whether this creature is intelligent or not based merely on its ability to speak.”

“Huh? Did I do it again...? Ah, c’mon! I did it again, ah man...”
Itsuki squatted down, holding her head mournfully.

The frightened girl—Kashima—was still down on her knees in the mud looking up blankly at the two sisters. It appeared she was still trying to process the situation. The elder sister moved toward Eve. Itsuki instinctively reached out a hand to try to stop her, but her sister passed by without heed.

She walked right into the range of my attacks without thinking twice, but... She’s not letting her guard down at all.

The girl lightly lowered her head.

“First allow me to apologize for my sister’s actions. I don’t sense

that you intend to do us any harm. I expect that you engaged in battle only because my sister here followed my instructions to an inappropriate degree, and rushed headlong into a fight with you. Itsuki, hurry up and apologize too.

“Whether you will be forgiven or not, I cannot say.”

Itsuki straightened her back and bowed deeply.

“I-I’m sorry... I, ehm...I’m kind of impulsive, y’see I jump to conclusions a lot when Aneki isn’t around. Er, well, a-are you okay?” Itsuki swung her arms back and forth nervously.

“Correct of you not to use Kashima-san as some kind of excuse instead of apologizing. That said, it seems my instructions were somewhat lacking. You are not solely to blame for this, Itsuki.”

Looks like I could talk to this older one. If all goes well, this fight could be over.

But Eve still couldn’t find her voice. The older sister swept her soaked hair into a ponytail. Despite not being Eve’s type, she saw something sensual about the girl.

“Allow me to ask you a few questions. If you cannot speak, might I ask you to indicate your answers through movement? To answer ‘yes,’ please raise your right hand, and raise your left to answer ‘no,’ if you wouldn’t mind.”

Hmph, I can do that...

Eve raised her right hand.

“Allow me to confirm this—do you have any hostility toward the three of us?”

Eve raised her left hand.

“Do you have any issue with us parting ways here?”

Left hand.

“...I have no more questions. We simply came to bring that girl over there back with us and had no intention of fighting you.”

Eve felt a sense of dread sweep over her.

She feels almost similar to Too-ka, but they’re different in another way. Who in the world is this girl?

The girl standing over Eve looked completely calm. Even in the

depths of the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters, she was cool and collected.

They all must've been caught up in that huge monster stampede earlier. Kashima's obviously scared. Itsuki's trying to play it cool, but you can see it has affected her. This older sister, though—she isn't fazed at all by any of this.

Her calm rivaled the smooth surface of a pond without a ripple in sight. Eve had no idea how powerful the older sister was—she hadn't been able to see her fight, but she suspected her wits were as sharp as her sword.

My instincts are telling me this isn't an opponent I could outsmart. My only option is to agree to her suggestion. But if Too-ka were to face this girl, I wonder what would happen?

Eve saw a sudden flash of light streak past her. She looked toward the elder sister—she had just thrown something.

The sword at her belt was missing. Eve heard a short cry, and turned to see a monster standing behind her, stabbed right between the eyes. It swayed, then fell straight forward into the mud. Eve had been about to react to the presence too, but the older sister had moved faster.

That lightning might still be affecting me, but she truly left me in the dust with that attack. She has such potential. Perhaps the only one among us who could face her now is Seras.

Itsuki briskly walked over to retrieve her sister's sword, singing her praises as she went. "The stronger I get, the less I feel I'll ever get to your level, Aneki!"

There was something happy about the way Itsuki spoke.

"No humans are special from the moment they are born. I did nothing but build myself up with very small actions. Before I realized it, I was so powerful that none could even begin to rival me. With enough concentration and good habits, anybody can reach these heights."

"Say it so I can understand, will ya?"

"Just try your best every day."

"C'mon? Isn't that like... A totally normal thing?"

"Being 'normal' is surprisingly difficult, Itsuki."

Eve was thinking frantically as she listened to them speak.

Heroes from another world... So that means they were summoned here alongside Too-ka. But Too-ka mentioned he's in hiding, didn't he? He told us a little about the heroes on our journey, but I don't think that's the full story. He said that the people of his clan think that he's dead and it's as if he wants them to go on believing that. I shouldn't mention his name to them.

"Conceiving of some way to outwit us—or is that rude of me to think?" mused the older sister. Her words sent Eve's heart racing. Could the girl read minds too?

"I, uh, was thinking about someone."

Hmh?!

Eve had spoken out loud.

"She said somethin'!" exclaimed Itsuki, her eyes lighting up as she handed the sword back to her sister. "Ahhh, what a freakin' relief. I woulda felt guilty if you never spoke again. Sorry. Like, seriously, sorry."

"It's also partly my fault for so carelessly approaching Kashima. I'm grateful to your sister for resolving the situation."

"Aneki! She seems like super nice!"

"You aren't alone... Are you? Searching for a lost companion perhaps?"

"Eh..." Eve faltered, considering her next words carefully. The girl wasn't Seras, but she seemed to be able to spot lies pretty well. "That's right. I'm searching for my captain."

"That captain of yours must be quite the man."

"Indeed."

"I see..."

Eve realized she had just let slip the information that her master was a man.

Now I have my voice back, I need to be careful not to give anything away.

Sensing she was at a disadvantage, Eve decided to leave as soon as possible, turning her back to the heroes from another world.

"Well, I have to get going. I trust we're in agreement as discussed?"

“Yes.”

“I won’t be answering any more questions, if you don’t mind.”

“I apologize for prying.”

“You’re a strange girl.”

“It’s Hijiri.”

“Eh?”

“Hijiri Takao—that’s my name. I was summoned by the Goddess Vicius of Alion as a hero from another world. But I believe you may already be aware of that.”

“Why did you offer me your name?”

“Simply my way of being polite, Eve Speed.”

“Well, th—what?”

Another slip-up—she can tell by my reaction that the name belongs to me.

“I simply picked that name as the most likely candidate from all the information I have gathered so far. I have heard word of the disappearance of a leopardman bloodsport warrior, you see. But please be assured that I don’t intend on telling anyone that we met you here today.”

“Why would you keep my secret?”

“You are strong-willed, powerful, and good. One should at least try their best to form connections with such people, especially in a world like this one.”

Eve thought quietly for a few moments.

“Hijiri Takao—I will remember that name.”

“Still... I am rather interested in this captain of yours. Considering you’re ‘searching’ for him, you mean to say he survived that great stampede which just passed through the forest? I hear that not even the Four Holy Elders nor the Disciples of Vicius could quite so easily defeat the humanoid monsters that were mixed in with that group. Perhaps only the former ‘Strongest Man in the World’ or the Goddess Vicius herself could handle them all and emerge unscathed.”

“...”

“In other words, he has enough power to survive facing those

humanoid types—or at least, that is what I’ve surmised about his abilities.”

“I’m in awe of your insights, but my captain...” said Eve, a low-pitched laugh escaping the back of her throat. “Well...his strength can’t be measured so simply as yours or mine.”

After leaving the heroes from another world, Eve became the beast again, following tracks through the forest. The rain grew steadily lighter, and clear sky began to poke out from between the clouds above just as the sun was setting.

The rain droplets glittered in the sunset light as Eve Speed raced through the forest, swift and true as a spear.

Chapter 4: Past Your Limits, and Beyond

Level up!

THE BATTLE HAD DESCENDED into a pure fight to the death. I continued to kill monsters and gain EXP, leveling up from time to time. It kept my MP fully restored and let me maintain a link with Piggymaru.

This is an insanely reckless strategy, even by my standards, but it's my only choice.

"Cut across their path, Sleil Berserk!"

The heavy rain just kept pounding down from the sky, mixing with geysers of blood spurting up to meet it. The booming of Sleil's hooves pounding the earth echoed below me incessantly.

"Para—"

It's too fast for that.

"Dark!"

I changed skills on the fly. The huge monster was blinded, slipping onto the ground and sending mud spraying into the air. I applied Paralyze to it once it was down, then berserk to finish it off right as another huge monster leapt out above my head.

This one's not just huge, but nimble too.

"Sleil, slow down a little... Piggymaru!"

"Squeee!"

I shot my tentacles up into the air.

"Sleep."

The monster dropped to the ground behind me, defenselessly crashing into the sodden earth. I turned back and added paralyze and berserk to the monster—the replacement for my old combo of Paralyze and Poison—to finish it off.

Not that Poison still didn't have its uses. I could apply it to

multiple targets at once, unlike Berserk which was single-target. There was a ring of monsters lying around the perimeter of the battlefield, all writhing and suffering under the affliction of my poison. A great chorus of cries and wails filled my ears.

I continued on, glancing over at the groaning monsters as I went. But in all honesty, we weren't in the best shape ourselves.

Piggymaru was extremely fatigued—the longer we linked together, the more vividly I felt the little slime's strength failing. But it was still trying its best as we battled on.

Slei was also injured. With one of her legs out of commission, she was harder to handle now, and a little slower.

I had injuries too, on my thighs and arms, but no bleeding. A short while ago, I took a pretty deep cut. It hurt, but there was almost no bleeding. I looked down and saw a scab already starting to form there. I thought about it for a while.

It must be my stat modifiers.

I checked my stat screen and saw that my HP had decreased.

I guess this HP stat modifier stops me from losing too much blood...?

My fight with the Soul Eater flashed through the back of my mind—the beam attack that had taken off my fingernails.

I wrapped it up with a scrap of fabric right away, but it didn't bleed enough for me to have to do anything else. Didn't hurt all that much either.

...Makes sense now.

So, my HP stat modifier will numb the pain, and reduce blood loss. I haven't been seriously injured yet, so I'd always just thought HP was a stat that gave you more life power. But...it makes me scared to think of what might happen if I ever hit 0 HP. Maybe all the blood loss and pain my stat modifier has been holding back is going to come on all at once. There's always the possibility that it's my 'defense' stat doing this too.

"I'll think about this more when I'm not occupied fighting for my life..."

I spurred Slei to a trot, then drove her on faster, holding my hands out in front of me on both sides as I rode.

"Even some of the monsters here value their lives, it seems. They're finally starting to understand I'm not to be messed with."

The smaller to mid-sized monsters tended to realize that first. I noticed a similar tendency in the monsters I faced in the Ruins of Disposal, too. When they were at a disadvantage, they would run away to save their own lives.

The golden-eyed horde gibbered in fear as they retreated. I calmed my breathing, giving them a twisted smile.

“Hmph. If you’re prepared to kill...you’d better be prepared to die!”

They aren’t completely worthless—they’re fine prey to be turned into EXP. I really would like to keep annihilating them but...

“About time. Here they come.”

Another horde has been observing me. They’ve been keeping a good distance for some time now...and based on their presence, there are a lot of them. The clever ones are always the most difficult to deal with. That cruel cunning, waiting to sweep up some prey that’s tired out from fighting with another predator. I wonder...

I let my arms hang loose at my sides—breathing slow, shallow, and calm—keeping my shoulders still.

One of the monsters, sensing I was tired, finally took the opportunity to strike. It roared as it bowled down a tree and revealed itself to me.

In an instant, my arm shot back up in the direction of the monster.

You thought I was so tired, I couldn’t go on any longer?

Surprise.

I applied paralyze, then berserk immediately afterward.

“Nyo?!”

I looked at the dying monster breathing its last few ragged breaths.

Jeez, fell for it hook, line, and sinker.

The monster was transformed into a fountain of blood, ceasing only when it breathed its last.

Level up!

Level 1997 → Level 2000

MP completely restored again. And I'm finally at level 2000, huh.

"Well, what now?" I looked toward the last horde of monsters, slowly circling me, waiting carefully for their chance to strike. "You sacrificed one of your own, and for what?"

I sighed deeply. Idiots.

"You think you're going to eat me? You're the ones that are going to be eaten..."

I fired off my status effect skills wildly and with abandon.

"Berserk!"

My breathing, which I'd kept in check before, was now quick and irregular. Sometimes I found my body didn't have the strength to do what I wanted it to.

Leveling up and gaining stat modifiers doesn't mean that I'm not getting tired. Fine. I'm sharpest when my brain has to work overtime.

It was as if I was right back to when I first found myself in this world. I had a vivid flashback to the time I found those corpses in the Ruins of Disposal.

"If I let you stop me, I'm never going to get my revenge on that foul Goddess, am I?"

I whirled Slei around, her hooves sliding in the mud. Where I had just been seconds earlier, a humanoid type's attack slammed into the ground. It was a laser attack, a beam of energy like the one the Soul Eater had. It left a crater in the ground with wisps of steam rising from it.

Slei continued to slide sideways.

"—Piggymaru."

"Sq-squee...!"

I stretched out my tentacles in a wide net once more.

Paralyze, Berserk, Dark, Sleep, Poison—I used every-thing at my disposal except Freeze, plunging into the depths of a true battle for my life.

I'm going to kill them... Kill them! Kill them all!

Level up!

Level up!

Level up!

Level up!

Level up!

Level up!

The monsters attacking me now were desperate to kill me. Their crazed expressions showed fear as they swarmed.

Then it happened just as three of them were closing on me in close quarters. I couldn't dodge it.

An attack came flying in from my blind spot, striking Slei in the flank. She let out a shrill cry, but before I could even call her name, she was already back in the fight. Inspiring me as she brayed loudly.

With a whinny and a snort, white breath steamed from her nostrils. She was like no horse I had ever seen before. Slei landed on her seven good legs perfectly and turned to face the monster.

"Snort... Grraah!"

It was as if there were shocks running through the forest, shaking even the rain droplets that fell. Slei's desire for revenge clearly terrified the several monsters in front of her.

"Paralyze." I didn't let the change go to waste, catching all of them in range with my paralyze skill.

Then a giant elephant with several protruding horns came lunging at us. It was quick and nimble—nothing like a real elephant.

Still out of range... Maybe I can...

"Piggymaru."

"Squ...ee..."

My tentacles didn't move.

I had more than enough MP in reserve to keep going.

"At your limit, huh?" I touched one of the little tentacles on my shoulder. "Piggymaru, you did good."

It's been trying so hard all this time. That's enough. More than

enough help in this fight.

I disconnected my link to Piggymaru.

“Squee... Squee!”

“You’ve done plenty. Don’t push yourself. Sleep now, and I’ll handle the rest.”

“Snort!” Slei was ready to fight, breathing heavily through her nose as if to say, “Leave this to me, Piggymaru!”

You must be well past your limits by now too, Slei.

I gently patted the black horse on the side of her neck.

“If you really feel like you’ve done all you can, don’t hide it—just tell me, okay? I’ll handle things on my own from there. I’m counting on you to look after Seras and the others when you get back.”

Maybe it’s unfair of me to word it like that, but there are still people for you to protect.

After a short pause, Slei nodded her head and snorted.

The battle continued. Perhaps it wasn’t as long as it felt, but to me it was as if we had been fighting for hours and hours. I took off my mask and spat blood, wiping the side of my mouth with my torn robe.

One left.

The monster approached at terrifying speed, screaming and howling as it came. I couldn’t even see straight anymore.

...I think that’s a humanoid type. That scumbag is using the other monsters’ corpses for cover. I can’t apply status effect skills to anything that isn’t in my line of sight. It must’ve realized that. But not much longer now.

“Slei,” I called out.

“Snort,” came her reply, though she was bleeding from her wounds.

“This is it. The final phase.”

I spurred her to a gallop, heading off to the side and changing position so I could get the enemy in my sights. The monster responded by shifting to stay in cover behind the corpses.

Simple, but effective. I can’t use Piggymaru’s tentacles right now, so my range is reduced. I need to get in closer, and find a way to get my eyes on it.

From the other side of the corpse pile, several balls of light launched up into the air. They twinkled, little particles of light bursting in the air. In the next moment, they rained down laser beams of light on us from above.

“Gah!”

I avoided the worst of it, but took a glancing hit to the left shoulder when I couldn't move out of the way fast enough. We avoided the rest thanks to Slei's quick dodges.

...That laser attack from earlier was this guy's work then. Firing out at us from a place of safety, eh? It must be detecting our location with sound.

But this rain... It's making us more difficult to pinpoint, and it can't fire at us accurately—it only knows our rough location. There were other monsters caught by that attack, too.

“I see... There are advantages to not caring about your fellow monsters.”

But this isn't looking too good. The enemy can attack me from beyond my range. If I don't do something quick, it'll just keep attacking, and I'll have no way of fighting back. I need to get sight on that thing, or all this will have been for nothing.

The balls of light floated up into the air and sent a second volley of lasers down upon us. We somehow managed to dodge them but had no way of counterattacking.

Unless I do something, it's all downhill from here.

“Piggymaru... Sorry, but—do you mind if I ask you to do just you one last job? It's a little dangerous.”

“Squee!”

Piggymaru stuck to my neck, as if giving me the final push as I wavered over what to do. The little slime stuck out a green tentacle—yes.

“I owe you, buddy.”

The lasers came for a third time.

Something fell to the ground, splashing down hard into the mud. It was the Lord of the Flies mask. The humanoid monster reacted immediately to the severed 'head.'

It should be thinking that one of its lasers did its job right about now. Rookie mistake.

There was an immediate change in the presence on the other side of the corpse wall. The humanoid monster made a sharp turn, drawn in by the bait, but still didn't reveal itself.

"Squeeeee!"

The little slime squealed. Sleii was already on the move too.

All this to get myself in a position where I can see the thing.

I needed a single moment, just one chance. But...I felt a little too slow. As the humanoid monster turned to the incoming attack, it seemed just a fraction of a second faster than I was.

Is this the end?

Sleii emerged from the other side of the monster as a feint, giving me time to launch the real attack.

"—Paralyze."

"Geh?!"

Realized now, have you? The real attack was coming from above, not from the side. But now it's too late!

With the mask, I wanted to make the humanoid monster think I was creating a decoy, and that I was going to attack from the side. In fact, my plan had more layers to it than that.

I tasked Piggymaru and Sleii with distracting the monster, but concealed myself on Sleii's side, hidden from view. When the monster was turned to the thud of the fly mask I'd filled with rainwater, I had Sleii launch me up into the air and timed the jump to be masked by the sound of Piggymaru's cry.

I could see that the paralyzed humanoid monster before me understood all that now.

"You hid yourself so my skills couldn't reach you, yeah? That meant you couldn't see what we were doing either."

There was always the chance that Piggymaru or Sleii could have been injured. Thankfully I managed to subdue the monster before that happened. Now I wasn't going to give it any last chances to trick us.

"Berserk."

Its blood spurted up into the air.

“Ow.” I looked over my left shoulder at the laser wound, wincing at the sharp pain.

Now that things have calmed down, it hurts really bad. But thanks to my HP stat modifier there isn't that much blood. I wonder how much is left?

“Stat screen's been closed ever since I cut my link with Piggymaru... Status Open.”

I could barely make out the semi-transparent screen that displayed my stats.

HP: +135/5898

My HP was almost gone.

It's affecting my mental state more than I expected it would—I'm in real danger here. My stat modifiers aren't going to be much use if I'm dead.

Level up!

Level 2017 → Level 2019

The number on my HP gauge started ticking up.

HP: +156/5898

I guess my mana is fully restored when I level up, but HP only recovers a bit at a time. I'll need to figure out what to do about this injury. But for now I don't detect the presence of any more monsters, so...

I suddenly realized there was a notification on my stat screen.

Skill level up!

Apparently, my Paralyze skill had finally leveled up again.

I wonder what kind of new effect it will have this time...

“What?!” I put my hand to my mouth in surprise as I squinted down at the notification. “This is... A superior rank version of Paralyze?”

Superior rank skill unlocked!

Slow.

I ran through the forest, looking down to read the screen as I went.

I use Paralyze most out of all my skills—and this is a superior version...? But judging by the name, it doesn't sound nearly as good. Inferior version, more like.

But maybe not. It's too early to judge—especially when it comes to my status effect skills. It could be useful with the right application. These broken, unfair skills have saved me on countless occasions—there has to be a way to use this one too.

“Guess I'll test it out later, when I find the time.”

Right now, checking on the party is my top priority.

I rushed toward Piggymaru and Sleil.

“Pum...pyuun...”

“Just relax and get some rest.”

I took another step through the mud and water pooled on the forest floor, holding Sleil in my arms as I went. Piggymaru was resting too, wrapped around my waist. The little slime felt weaker than usual, as if it was barely hanging on to me.

Sleil was clearly exhausted, and had completely transformed back into her first form. The injury to her right hind leg remained. I bandaged it with cloth but coupled with her extreme fatigue the injury left little chance of Sleil walking on her own.

“Sorry for pushing you both so hard.”

The heavy rain had let up as quickly as it came.

Almost like after the fighting was done, even the rain knew to quit.

The heavy clouds drifted off, and the sky was beginning to turn a crimson red—the sun would set completely before long.

Are Seras and the others still sheltering in that cave? I wouldn't be opposed to just walking straight on through the night if I was on my own—I'm used to the dark—but with Sleil to think about, I don't want to take that risk.

The complex maze of trees was painted in the colors of sunset as I picked my way through. Sweat dripped from the tips of my hair, but I kept going.

Along the way I saw endless reminders of the massacre that had taken place. The split and splintered trees in my path spoke of the intense battle and the whole area was overflowing with monster corpses. From time to time, I heard moans from off beyond the trees—monsters poisoned, but not quite dead yet.

I looked forward at the ravaged path that lay in front of me.

“Right, then... This all depends on how accurately I can remember the map compared to where we are right now, but...”

Fighting those monsters while constantly keeping my location in mind wasn't possible, even for me.

“I could just follow the trail of corpses and I'll get back eventually, I suppose.”

“Pumpee...”

Sleil started swishing her tail back and forth.

“Hmm? What is it?”

Her tail started swishing in a certain direction, off into the forest.

“You want me to go that way?”

“Pumpyuun.”

“Don't tell me... You can detect Seras's scent, even at a time like this?”

“Pumpee. ♪”

“All right then.”

I continued on, following Sleil's directions. On the way Piggymaru stirred to check on my condition—I tried to reassure it that I was fine.

Lucky Seras isn't here—she'd know I was lying.

“I never expected to fight against numbers like those without taking a few hits, but...”

Thankfully there had been no monsters on the level of the Soul Eater. It would have been a short fight. That thing was there to prevent veteran heroes from ever making it to the surface. It made sense that it was on a different level.

But there had been some clever monsters on the battlefield today.

“It's dangerous for me to assume that Soul Eater was the best the humanoid types have to offer...”

I continued walking, absorbed only in putting one foot in front of the other. Then I stopped. I took a deep breath and sighed.

“...Figures.”

No reason they'd let weakened prey slip through their fingers, is there?

Monsters were gathering around me again.

There's one positive way to look at this—these are just the stragglers that dropped out of the horde early. They don't look too strong, but...I'm carrying Sleil, and I'm beat. If they all swarm me at once, I might not be able to take them.

“Okay...I can make this work. Status open.”

Let's test out that new skill. Its MP cost is...5000?! That's a huge jump from 10 MP for all my other ones. Fine. I've got over 60,000 MP remaining. No harm in testing it out once, at least.

Fearsome monster cries shook the trees, echoing out in the growing dark. They approached from all directions. Sleil and Piggymaru moved to try to help, but I quietened them.

“I can handle this. Slow.”

All right, how does this work—whoa!

I stared wide-eyed at my stat screen—the MP gauge was decreasing at an alarming speed.

“What is this skill? It's eating up mana almost like I'm linked up with Piggymaru... Maybe even faster!”

I stopped short. The MP gauge's countdown had distracted me from arrows and spears flung at me from the left and right. They

weren't as strong as I expected—the spear especially was way off target and my enemies were hopeless at archery compared to Seras. I drew my shortsword.

I could even cut them from the air with this thing.

I made up my mind in an instant and jumped into action. That was when I realized something was off.

“...Ah? They're s-slow?”

The spears, the arrows...even the monsters! The rain droplets falling from the leaves... Everything is just kind of...slow.

But it seemed that I could move normally.

This isn't quite slow enough to be called 'slow-motion' or anything. What about Piggymaru and Sleil?

“Sque.”

“Pumpyuun.”

There was nothing slow about the way they sounded.

Is that because they're attached to me? Or maybe there's some area around me that isn't affected by the skill? Maybe both?

“...I'm going to have to put you down, Sleil.”

I held out my arm toward the advancing monster.

At this speed...I have more than enough time to spare. Nothing dangerous about the situation—good time to test this out, then.

“Paralyze.”

Error: Duplicate skill—cannot apply twice.

So, I can't use Paralyze at the same time as the superior skill. How about...

“Dark, Berserk, Poison.”

Error: Duplicate skill—cannot apply twice.

I can't use any of them alongside slow, then.

“I have to use this skill on its own, eh? Well...”

I switched my shortsword into my off-hand and advanced on the monster.

“Depending on how I use it, that might not be so bad.”

I walked calmly, quickly sidestepping a slowed projectile. The world remained slow as ever. I was now in front of the monster which had thrown the spear—it stared at me in confusion.

Surprise.

“Ah, I should test this out too.”

I walked closer, holding out my empty left hand toward the monster. When I got close enough...

“Gh, rh...? Graaah!”

The monster’s slowing effect was gone. When I saw it could move normally, I quickly pulled back my hand. The monster was pulled back into the world of slowed time.

That means it works at a range from me. Seems to be about a meter away. Was that why Piggymaru and Sleii could move normally?

“Then...” I closed in fast on the monster and cut its throat. “It takes them a pretty long time to react and defend themselves.”

It’s easy for me to get the first blow in and target their weak spots. Must be terrifying from their perspective. An enemy closing in on you to attack, and you’re too slow to defend against it.

I turned on my heel to go and clean up the other monsters. There were three remaining, all with clear terror and panic on their faces.

“Wait a minute...”

When I activated this skill, I didn’t have all of them in my line of sight. They attacked me from different directions—I couldn’t possibly have been looking at all of them. All my skills so far have needed me to be looking at the target to activate.

“So long as the enemy is in range, I don’t need to be looking at them?”

I see—now I get what’s so superior.

My mind was racing.

This should be useful in situations where I want to avoid being

ambushed, or when I need to get out of an enemy's attack range as quickly as possible.

"I should check what the maximum range on this thing is later. Also..."

Are the targets I touch still affected by the slowing effect?

I looked at Slei's tail swishing back and forth.

It looks like it's going in and out of the 1 meter range at times... But it isn't slowing down at all. Does that mean targets that have touched me can still move normally?

"Nh? What's this number...?"

I noticed an extra display next to my MP gauge.

Remaining: 1313/5000

The number was going down. Then that meant...

"The effect lasts until the 5000 MP I used runs down to zero?" I said, piecing it together in my head. "But if it's getting displayed like this, then maybe..."

I quickly took care of the other three monsters, my mind still racing.

Before long the gauge hit 0, and the world returned to normal speed.

"I still have plenty of MP left." I felt the presence of more monsters nearby. "Let's test this out too."

I moved toward the new threat.

That skill is on cooldown.

"Ugh, figures."

This new skill has a limit of 5000 MP at a time. This means I can't just dump all my mana into it in one go. And no spamming it until all my mana gets used up. There's a limit.

"Hmm. That also means I can't activate and deactivate it at will in

the middle of combat.”

I turned and continued on my way, knowing a little more about how my new skill worked. I could always take out monsters like normal until it cooled down.

“Right, then... Oof?!”

My knees almost failed me, and I had to struggle to stay on my feet. I put away my shortsword. Then I stood up straight and stuck out my arms in the usual pose.

Might be a bit tough to go around fighting this many of them in my current state, but my faithful skills will... Huh?

“P-pakyuun!” Sleil suddenly jumped up excitedly.

“Yeah, I sense it too.”

There was a strange presence mixed in with the other monsters, moving toward us at terrifying speed.

Might be tough for me in this state. I'd better finish that one off as quickly as possible.

I pointed my arm directly toward the closest monster. And it was sliced in half before my eyes.

A spurt of bright red blood arched from the falling body.

I lowered my arm.

“I finally found you, Too-ka.”

I understood why Sleil was so excited, as two yellow eyes peered back at me from the gloom.

Then Eve transformed into a yellow blur, dashing to slay the monsters that were coming toward me. The dropouts from the horde were no match for the strongest bloodsport warrior in the world.

Eve walked back to me when she was done, wiping the gore from her blade. “You’re good now. Or well, not exactly good, but...” she said, noticing my injury.

Her fur was wet and heavy—she must’ve come through the rain to get me.

“Couldn’t stay put?” I asked.

I had sort of expected Eve to do something like this. She’s stubborn—well, she’s earnest. She feels way more obligated to help other people than

most. That's better than just being irresponsible, at least in my opinion.

"Sorry... But as the one who caused the monsters to stampede, I felt I had to—"

I held up a hand to stop her.

"You already apologized. I'm tired of hearing it." Then I smiled at her. "You really do have a strong sense of responsibility, don't you? Come on, let's go."

I walked on, and Eve followed in silence, until finally she spoke again.

"Why didn't you reprimand me?" she asked.

"I assumed you were going to come after me anyway. And you ended up saving me, didn't you? So...that's that. Now it's getting dark, I'll be relying on you to find our way back."

"I left marks as I went. We should be able to make it back easily enough."

"If you're here, I guess that means you convinced Seras to let you leave?"

"Your advice came in useful."

"Glad to hear it."

"Hmph... Hang on! You're being—"

"...too soft on you?" I finished her sentence.

"N-no... I know there is nothing soft about you. I know that, and yet I somehow feel you're being too lenient with me."

"What standards are you using for leniency?"

"Standards?"

"Listen, I just don't put much stock in blaming people, that's all."

Not to mention that Eve didn't do it maliciously and she knew exactly what she was doing. She apologized and feels bad about what she did.

"You're going to be tougher on yourself than I would be."

"Too-ka..."

I wasn't able to suppress a chuckle. "And I'm not exactly a good enough person to go around calling out other people for their actions..."

Eve thought about that quietly for a while.

Night was falling on the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters. The air was stuffy, the rain and the plants mixed into that unique smell of the forest. A cool breeze lightly buffeted my skin, still smelling of the rain it'd swept away.

"Are Sleis and Piggymaru okay?"

"I think so, yeah. We should have Seras take a look at them both when we get back, though."

Eve lightly stroked Sleis's back.

"You protected Too-ka so well."

"Pumpyuun."

"Allow me," she said, taking Sleis off my shoulder. Then Eve picked me up and hauled me over her other shoulder.

"Whoa, hey?!" I was impressed, realizing all over again just how strong Eve really was.

She doesn't look that brawny at first glance, but wow.

"Heh heh, this is my specialty, you might say," she said, as if she'd read my mind. "If we meet a monster along the way, I'll put you down to fight... That is, if I can count on you to help?"

"Of course."

"Hmph, our captain is reliable as always."

Eve continued on, unhesitating—like some of that weight of responsibility had been lifted. After a few minutes she stopped suddenly, as if she had just remembered something.

"Come to think of it, there's something I should tell you."

"Eh?"

"When I was searching for you, I came across some other heroes from another world."

Eve told me about her encounter with them in the forest.

"Kashima and the Takao sisters, huh?"

"The girl Kashima didn't give me her name—that's just what the others called her."

2-C are here. In this forest.

"They're probably here to gain EXP by killing golden-eyed

monsters.”

They were caught up in that stampede earlier. I feel bad about putting Kashima in danger, but if the Takao sisters were with her she's probably fine.

“Too-ka, just who is that Hijiri Takao girl? She's not one to be underestimated.”

“Well, I'd have to agree with you there.”

The Takao sisters were a strange presence within 2-C, so much so that Kirihiro and his gang actively ignored them, and even the Zakurogi kept his distance.

Well, I guess Zakurogi was just more interested in chasing skirts in general.

The Takao sisters were untouchable and unknowable. Itsuki I could sort of wrap my head around, but Hijiri was a different story. It was as if there were emotions hiding deep under the surface that nobody could reach.

“It's not like she refuses to talk with other people—and she can have normal conversations when she wants to—but everything she says is logically calculated. She just tends to say it in a way that's kinda difficult to understand.”

“She sounds quite sensible when you put it that way,” said Eve.

“She is. It's just when you're talking to her that it's...”

“...like you aren't talking to a human?” Eve finished my sentence.

“Ah, yeah... I guess that is the feeling I get.”

Or it's like you can't tell whether she's bad at expressing her feelings, or if they're missing altogether.

It wasn't as if I'd had any interactions with her in the old world—I just knew she was near the top of some secret hot girl ranking at school. One day, when Oyamada tried to make fun of her for it, she lightly brushed him off as always.

She said, “I believe those interested in such rankings should perhaps try dating apps that are so popular amongst the public nowadays. They can find what they seek there, I trust.”

You could interpret that as meaning she isn't much interested in herself, I guess. Still, if Kashima and the Takao sisters are here, then that means...

“The others must be here too.”

Kirihara Takuto, Oyamada Shougo, Yasu Tomohiro, Sogou Ayaka... Assuming nobody else has been disposed of, that is. Ikusaba Asagi's in our class too, isn't she... She's just as dangerous as Kirihara, but for different reasons. Anyway, we're lucky that Eve didn't come across Kirihara or Oyamada out there.

I told Eve a little about my classmates.

“Understood. Kirihara, Oyamada, Yasu, and Ikusaba are the ones to watch out for, then.”

“Oh, and the girl Ikusaba Asagi really doesn't like being called Ikusaba, so maybe you should call her Asagi. Unless you deliberately want to upset her.”

“What about this Sogou you spoke of?”

“She's not a bad person... I owe her a favor.”

“I see, I'll remember that.”

There's no need for us to tangle with them here, though—especially if the Goddess might be accompanying them. I don't have any forbidden magic yet. I'm hoping that's what I need to take her down. Until I do, it's best that 'Mimori Touka' stays dead. It's possible that the other heroes from 2-C could get in the way of my revenge... There's a good chance I'll butt heads with some of them one day.

“You were right not to reveal my name to the Takao sisters.”

“Hijiri was cunning with her words—she's a sharp one.”

“She'd be a troublesome enemy to face, if it ever came to that.”

“Hmph, troublesome even for you, Too-ka?”

“Maybe. There are other people I really don't want to face, either...”

I'd rather fight a hundred Takao Hijiris than them.

“Th-there are others that even you couldn't face down?”

“Yeah.”

My foster parents. I would have no idea how to fight them—I couldn't do it.

“They're the only ones I could imagine unconditionally surrendering to.”

“Looks like we’ve almost made it,” said Eve.

We were now nearing the cave where Seras and Lis sat waiting. We saw monster corpses near the mouth of the cave—but not ones that Eve and I had killed. Some were stuck with arrows directly between the eyes. We exchanged looks.

“Seras’s handiwork.”

“Hmph,” Eve grunted, inspecting another monster’s injuries.

“Fine swordplay... She deliberately cut their throats to avoid any risk of their cries attracting more.”

As we entered the cave, Sleil gave a short cry.

“Lady Sleil?” It was Seras, holding her sword. “...and, Sir Too—” Her voice broke and then she regained her composure. “Sir Too-ka... It’s good to see you are safe.”

Holding herself back from sounding too happy to see us.

As Seras waved us into the cave, Lis popped her head out as well.

“Big Sister! Mr. Too-ka!” Lis’s face was warm, bright, and filled with relief, but in the next moment it changed completely. She turned pale and put both her hands over her mouth.

“Sleil...

I went to take Sleil from Eve in my arms.

“Seras, take a look at her, will you?”

After treating her, Seras came over to sit next to me.

“How’s she doing?”

“She will live.”

“I see.”

Looks like Piggymaru’s just really tired—the little guy will probably be fine after some rest.

“So, you’re used to looking after horses?” I asked Seras.

“I’ve lived with horses ever since I was a child. Lady Sleil is a little special of course, but in her second form is quite similar to a regular horse.”

I had Seras patch up my injury earlier too, wrapping my shoulder

in a bandage.

“You know first aid, and so much else besides. You can use the power of the spirits, your sword, and you know how to handle a horse. I couldn’t hope for more.”

Seras’s head dropped, her expression gloomy. “...But I’m still an uninteresting high elf though, aren’t I?”

That wasn’t the reaction I was expecting.

“Why are you worrying about that again...”

“Whatever should I do to become interesting?” she asked.

“Well... If you really want to be more interesting, I wouldn’t recommend making faces like that.”

“Perhaps it’s my nature, or... Am I just not cut out for it?”

“You just need to learn to use what you have.” I sighed, and poked Seras’s forehead with my index finger.

“...Uh?”

“You’re missing the point.”

“Which is?”

“You’re quick-witted and think fast on your feet.”

Seras’s blue eyes opened wide—she looked glad to hear that.

“Do I really seem that way to you, Sir Too-ka?” There was something strange in her voice—she sounded happy.

“If you don’t find a way to recognize your strengths as strengths, they’ll come back to bite you.”

“In the palace, I believe I was told something quite similar.” Seras laughed nervously. “I’m confident in my abilities to perform serious negotiations or ceremonies, but...informal conversation is quite difficult.”

Ahh, now I get it...

“Maybe you’re trying too hard? I’m glad that you’re honest and sensible.”

“Do you think I’m fine the way I am?”

“Being able to make small talk isn’t everything.”

“Hmm... Should I just accept that?”

“What, you think I’m just trying to make you feel better?”

Seras scratched her pale cheek with her thin fingers. “...A little.”

I pointed to Seras’s lap, where her thighs were neatly aligned. My jacket was lying over them, torn in several places after the day’s battle. There was a simple sewing kit by her side.

“Some people can sew, and some people can’t. I’m terrible at it, you know? But you don’t think people are worthless just because they can’t sew, right?”

“Of course not.”

“That’s what I’m talking about.”

“...Ahhh.”

“Whatever it is you might think about yourself, I’m glad you’re the way you are.”

“...Thank you.” Seras looked a little inspired, picked up the needle and thread, and got to work.

Is she happy that I complimented her sewing abilities?

Her lips curled gently at the edges.

Is this what a family’s supposed to be, I wonder? Give and take. Seras Ashrain might just have those instincts in perfect balance.

Seras checked my pocket watch.

“It’s almost time for us to change,” she said.

...Already, huh?

I walked with Seras to the mouth of the cave and dispelled Sleep to wake up Eve.

“Are you going to let Lis sleep a little longer?” she asked, looking around.

“Yeah, let’s give her a couple more hours.”

Lis was curled up next to Slel and Piggymaru. The little slime was compact as ever. The cave was cramped, so the three of them took up almost the whole inner area. There was just enough space for two others, and one of us had to post up outside.

“We’ll leave as soon as I wake up,” I said.

“Understood.”

I'd rather go straight away to find the witch, but with these injuries and fatigue that doesn't seem possible. We're heading into unexplored territory—we should rest and store up as much energy as possible on the way.

Eve went outside to stand guard.

Reliable as ever.

“...Right, guess I'll get some sleep.”

“Yes, we need our rest,” said Seras, folding the sleeves of some laundry as she sat on one of our bedrolls. I lay down next to her, the spot still warm where Eve had been sleeping, put my arm under my head as a pillow and closed my eyes.

“...”

I was still wide awake.

I could cast Sleep on myself—just wouldn't be able to dispel it. Too risky—I wouldn't be able to respond to any sudden threats.

“Can't sleep?” asked Seras.

“I'm still worked up from everything that's happened. Well, it's good just to lie down.”

Seras patted her lap. “I don't know if this will calm your nerves, but how about it?”

“Returning the favor?”

“I'm not joking this time, you know?”

“You should go to sleep, too.”

“I... Actually, I'm so worked up, I don't believe I could sleep either.”

I see, she's putting on a show for my sake.

“...All right then, I'll take you up on the offer.”

I shifted myself to place my head on Seras's lap. It felt different than a regular pillow—warm with the heat from her body.

“Last time I put my head in someone's lap was with my foster mother, years and years ago.

“...”

“...Seras?” I asked, looking up. I saw her blue eyes gazing down at me from above her chest. “Hey, Seras...”

“...Eh?”

“You feeling tired?”

“Ah, yes. I suppose I am.”

“Quit whenever you want and get some rest.”

“Ahem. Yes, Sir Too-ka.” Seras swallowed.

“You’re doing it on purpose, aren’t you?” I tried to get up, but then gave up halfway.

“What do you mean?”

“The way you’re acting with me. It’s been changing recently.”

“You noticed, then.”

“In my own way, yes.”

I’ve been trying to be more casual with her in general, finding a way to figure out our relationship. I tried to make it seem natural, but... It didn’t work out that way, I suppose.

“I feel like I’m the one giving the orders right now. I felt like unless I made it clear that I’m the boss, that line might start to get blurred.”

I’ve been doing the same with Eve—I actually found her difficult to talk to at first. But since I started giving the orders, she’s been incredibly easy to work with.

“You don’t like it?” I asked, as Seras looked down at me.

“No, It’s just...”

Seras placed her hands on either side of my head, boxing me in.

“Please don’t keep everything to yourself.”

“Do I look like I’m struggling that badly?”

“When the monsters swarmed us, you acted as if you could handle them all single-handedly. You calmed Eve and Lis—reassured them that everything was going to be okay.” Seras’s thin fingers gently combed through my bangs.

“Ah,” I realized suddenly. “You sensed I was lying.”

“Yes.”

The power of her spirits saw through my bluff, then.

“I thought the only ones who could face down that many would be me and Piggymaru. But if I showed I was even a little bit shaken up about it, Eve and Lis would get nervous too. And if Eve felt guilty enough about something, I wouldn’t put it past her to go rushing into battle on a suicide mission.”

That’s why I needed to calm everyone down. I had to use every aspect of my attitude and expression to make them believe that things were going to be fine. Even then, Eve still left the cave and came after me though.

“It scares me sometimes. That someday the weight you’ve saddled yourself with will become too much. That you’ll break suddenly. It worries me.”

Her words seemed almost prophetic.

“Well yeah... I suppose that old cliché is the worst case scenario, isn’t it.” I chuckled.

“Sir Too-ka?”

The worst-case scenario.

I’ve already been there. The tiny apartment I was raised in. The worst place imaginable.

“You brat, I’m gonna break your arm next time!”

“Don’t you even freakin’ look at me!”

“I’m gonna kill you!”

“Hey, Touka! Here’s your dishwater! Little more water in it this time, drink up!”

“What’s with that look in your eyes, Touka? I’ll break you, kid!”

“Why’d I ever have a kid anyway? Woulda been nice if youda saved me the trouble and just died in the womb!”

That tiny apartment was my own cramped little hell.

Back then, in the depths of my murderous intent toward my parents, one thought was stronger than all the others.

“You think you can break me? Come on and try it.”

"I don't know about other people, but... Seems like I don't break that easy."

I've already lived through hell. There's nothing worse that anybody could ever do to me. I raised my middle finger to the Goddess when I was sent down to the Ruins of Disposal. After all that, I'm back to the 'Touka' I was in my childhood. If I was normal, this world would've already broken me long ago.

"But Sir Too-ka, you might believe that, but—"

"Seras," I interrupted, raising my right hand and placing it on Seras's smooth cheek. She didn't move—didn't look away.

"Yes?"

"If you're that worried about me, then support me, with all your strength."

"—I will," Seras answered, her voice clear and commanding. She gently entwined her fingers with mine. "Please, allow me to assist you, Sir Too-ka."

When I moved my hand from her cheek, she let go immediately.

"Ahem... But please tell me when you are having difficulties, and don't hold back. If there's any way I can assist you, I will."

"Overprotective as always, vice-captain."

Seras laughed. "I'd rather you called it devotion."

"If I had a big sister, I guess this is what it'd be like."

"Heh heh... Come to think of it, how old are you, Sir Too-ka?"

Hm? Didn't I tell her?

When I told Seras my age, she blinked at me in surprise.

"Eh? Sir Too-ka... You're younger than me?!"

"But like high elves live for a really long time, don't they? Of course I'm younger..."

That's why it was hard for me to get used to giving orders.

"Nineteen," said Seras, pointing at herself.

"That's how old you are?"

She nodded yes.

Younger than I thought. No... Especially with how much she knows

and the books she's read.

"I figured you'd been around for a hundred years or something..." I said.

"Well, regarding that... We refer to the time in our lives when we can most freely use our bodies as an elf's 'active period'. Compared to the other races, our active periods are typically quite long."

So they have long life expectancies? Plus anti-aging, I suppose.

"That said, some of us reflect our age much the same as humans do. Some have shorter active periods than others, there are even those with lifespans close to that of humankind."

So high elves just tend to have longer lifespans... But Seras is only 19 years old, so it's too soon to tell how long her active period will be.

"Hmm, wait a minute, how old did you think I was, anyway?"

"In your early to mid-twenties, perhaps. You seem unusually calm and composed."

"I see. You're not gonna start treating me like a younger brother now, are you?" I said, joking a little.

"N-no... You are the captain of our 'Lord of the Flies Brigade'—you may be younger than I am, but I cannot simply change the way I act toward the person to whom I have sworn fealty. Please, don't be concerned."

"Lord of the Flies... I'm just using that thing to hide my face is all. I like the mask, but I don't exactly have real strength of character or anything."

"You're incorrect, Sir Too-ka." Seras brought her face closer to mine. Her elegant blonde hair was swept lightly away from her pale cheeks. "You're already my irreplaceable, one and only king."

I suddenly realized how tired I was, and sleep came over me all at once—my consciousness fell into a deep darkness.

"...Too-ka... Ya... di... g... you?"

Seras is saying something... I think. I can't tell what it is.

I felt an uneasiness and then a strange warmth come over me. The sensation felt good, but it hovered on the edge of my consciousness.

At that moment, I drifted o—

SERAS ASHRAIN

SERAS LOOKED DOWN CAUTIOUSLY at Too-ka, sleeping on her lap with his eyes closed.

“Sir Too-ka... Are you asleep?” She asked quietly, but there was no answer. When she felt his body relax against hers, Seras knew.

His expression was peaceful—he appeared to be sleeping so deeply.

Sir Too-ka was putting on a brave face, but he must be exhausted.

She gently put a hand on his forehead, as if reaching out to touch something fragile and delicate. He didn’t react, not even when she whispered his name again just in case.

It’s rare to see him sleep this deeply. He always looks ready to jump into battle at a moment’s notice—to open his eyes and immediately start fighting.

Too-ka had told her about his time in the Ruins of Disposal, and the impact it had on him—that it was too dangerous to give oneself completely over to rest down there.

Seras couldn’t begin to imagine how hard it must have been for him, spending day after day in a nightmarish place like that. She lovingly stroked the hair on his forehead.

But you escaped from that nightmare using your own power...for revenge.

And now, Too-ka was running himself ragged in pursuit of that goal, no matter how much it wore him out.

Sir Too-ka...

There was something childlike about the way he looked when he was sleeping. Maybe that was just how a boy of his age was supposed to look. Seras suddenly felt an intense rush of love for him swell within. As if urged on by the instinctive heat building inside her, she reached out and touched his chest.

His figure was thin, but manly. He was warm to the touch and heat flowed into the palm of her hand.

When was the last time I touched a man's body? It's only a vague memory now. When I still lived in my hometown, I remember being carried on my father's back as a child... But the man in my lap is nothing like my father.

He's special. This is something completely different. When I was growing up, I never imagined a human would someday be so important to me.

Seras wanted to feel that special human warmth just a little longer.

Will he stay asleep? Will I accidentally wake him?

Doubts floated through her mind, back and forth, but her desire to touch him grew stronger.

Is this feeling so strong because I've repressed it? It's the first time he's been so defenseless—perhaps that's what is making me bold.

The brakes were off, and Seras's feelings toward Too-ka were snowballing out of control.

Too-ka's face looked so relaxed and carefree. She felt a tightening, but sweet sensation in her chest as she lightly stroked Too-ka's cheek.

I never thought I would ever feel this way about...anyone.

Love. Of course, Seras had seen the word in stories from all across the world, from ancient times to the modern day, and yet it was something only other people experienced. But now she knew that it was real, she wanted to touch it—to get closer to it. The more she journeyed with him, and the more the distance between them closed, the stronger her chest pounded whenever she saw him.

“...”

In the stories, those lovers would lose themselves in one another, burning in the storms of passion, eventually falling into each other's arms and—

Silently ashamed of the warmth spreading across her face, Seras tried to get control of her breath. Back then, she'd read every book she could get her hands on, cover to cover. Among them was a volume titled “The Acts of Man and Woman in the Night.” Young Seras hadn't

been sure what much of it meant, but the contents were still carved into her memory.

“...”

I never thought... Maybe if Sir Too-ka and I become closer, will he and I do the things lovers did in the book?

Too-ka turned over in his sleep, sending a shiver running through her shoulder and making her tense up.

There was a new sensation, different to just that of his head on her lap. She looked down to see Too-ka's face was nuzzled against her stomach, just below her belly button.

She nervously brought her face closer to his.

“S-Sir T-Too-ka?” she called out, desperately trying to suppress her panic. There was still no answer—he was fast asleep.

Seras breathed a sigh of relief.

He just turned over, that's all. Perhaps his left shoulder was hurting. Now his right is facing down, so... He's lucky he didn't brush his injury against my leg as he moved.

Seras became aware of just how extraordinarily hot her body now felt. Deciding to do something before it got out of control, she very carefully lifted his head from her lap and laid it down on the bedroll, rolling him over to face upward. She gazed down at his sleeping face—even that move hadn't caused him to stir.

“I must just be tired too...” she said, closing her eyes.

She decided to go and calm herself down—get a drink of water perhaps. But the moment she tried to stand, her legs went numb.

N-no...! My legs must be cramped from kneeling for so long.

They buckled beneath her and she tripped over her own feet. She was about to fall right on top of Too-ka when both her hands shot out to meet the bedroll. Although she avoided the worst of it, her chest brushed against Too-ka's a little.

“Phew.”

He's still sleeping there so soundly and peacefully...

He seemed so completely defenseless. Her face was so close to his, but she couldn't tear her eyes away from looking down at him. All that

escaped her lips were hot, panting gasps for air. It was as if every other sound in the world had been shut out.

His unguarded face was so close to hers now. So close...

“Too-ka...”

The heat permeated her whole body, and for a few heartbeats, she lost consciousness.

When she recovered, her lips were touching his.



She'd brought her body in closer to his. Her chest had only barely touched his a moment ago, but now she was completely on top of him. She felt his heart beating.

Is my heartbeat going to wake him? Am I touching his injured left shoulder?

These were her only worries now. Everything else within her had stopped processing what was happening.

For Seras, it felt like time had stopped as their lips touched. Seras realized her breathing was heavy. It wasn't just her head—her whole body was being overtaken by the same mysterious warmth.

Will Too-ka wake up, or won't he?

It was all she could think of—all that she could base her decision on.

If he wakes up... If he's awake, then I...!

Seras gasped, regaining her composure. She pulled her lips away from his, drawing her burning body back in a flash.

An act unworthy of a knight who has sworn herself to her king. Unthinkable. An act which muddies my oath.

The heat Seras felt quickly dissipated, and a cold sweat formed on her forehead. She wiped her mouth, her face turning pale.

"I-I got carried away."

Waves of regret came crashing down on her from all sides. She felt guilt welling up inside her, and a deep embarrassment spreading through her chest.

This isn't the first time this has happened. There was once before, when my feelings for Too-ka became too much, and I lost control. But that doesn't excuse this. Am I just bound to lose myself in passions such as these?

That can't be true...

Seras couldn't believe herself.

More than all that, this wasn't right. Doing it like...this. When Too-ka is awake, I'm forced to hide my feelings toward him... But pushing all those feelings on him now, when he's sleeping—it's wrong.

Seras felt a sudden swell of anxiety swirling within her.

What if he woke up partway through, and...?

The thought sent a shiver down her spine. Her hands moved unconsciously to her still wet lips.

If he was awake, how would I explain that to him?

The guilt and self-reproach were making her dizzy, so she turned and lay down, facing away from him. But no matter how she tried, Seras couldn't sleep. Her heartbeat sounded louder than it ever had before—not beating the passionate rhythm it had earlier, but fearful and conflicted now.

Should I talk to him about what happened?

Yes, I have to. I must, absolutely. Hiding the truth is the coward's way—the despicable way.

But how would I explain? With that one action, have I ruined all the trust that Too-ka has built up in me? If I confess to him, will he not completely lose faith in me?

This whirlwind of feelings raged inside her, with no sign of stopping. Seras found herself completely unable to get to sleep.

The only way I could rest now, is if Too-ka used his skill to put me to sleep.

No, some day—some day in the near future—I have to tell him. Even if he doesn't choose to forgive me. I cannot keep this a secret forever.

Seras curled up, feeling as if she was about to cry.

But I... Sir Too-ka, I'm sorry. Just a little longer. Please allow me just a little more time, to build up the courage to come clean. Just a while more...

Suddenly, she heard Too-ka stir behind her.

MIMORI TOUKA

MY CONSCIOUSNESS RETURNED TO ME.

I checked my watch.

I barely slept at all. Might've been ten minutes since I drifted off, give or take.

I looked over to Seras. She was laid down on her side, her back

toward me, but seemed to still be awake.

I had a strange feeling.

My upper body was wrapped in bandages, with only some of my skin exposed, yet...there was a lingering warmth there. There was something else...

I touched my finger to my lips. They were warm and wet—unusually so. I looked over at Seras in silence.

I felt her emotions—shame, nervousness, dismay, guilt, and self-reflection all mixed and tangled up as one.

“Can’t sleep?” I asked as I sat up and ruffled my hair.

Seras’s hunched shoulders flinched in response, and she drew in a deep breath before answering.

“I-I’m sorry.”

What in the world is she apologizing for?

“What for?”

“...S-sorry.”

I should pretend I haven’t noticed anything’s wrong.

“Want me to put you to sleep?”

That’s probably what’s best for her right now.

“Yes. Please,” she said, her whole body tightening up a little.

“...Sleep.”

I began to hear that familiar, regular breathing of hers. She turned in her slumber, facing up toward the roof of the cave. I peeked over at her out of the corner of my eye and sighed.

Ever since our fight with Civit she’d been trying to keep her distance and it was getting awkward. I think she figured her feelings would only get in the way of my revenge.

Still... She was bolder about it than I expected.

All of this happened so suddenly for her. Her body and mind were so completely exhausted from those lonely days on the run. Then she finally found someone she felt she could trust, and that person ended up saving her life like that. If I’d been in her position—rescued by someone—then I might well have fallen in love with them, too.

I was intending to go to sleep after she did, but I just lost consciousness first. Lying there, my head on Seras's lap, I completely drifted off.

“When did that happen...” I wondered quietly to myself, looking over at Seras. Her chest rose and fell slowly with every breath. “When did I start trusting you so much?”

Chapter 5: The Witch's Domain

AFTER OUR REST, we left the cave and hurried onward. It was still dark when we set out, but before long, the sky brightened into dawn and the sun rose overhead. Clear, fresh morning air filled my lungs.

We met no particular obstacles on our way—likely because most of the monsters had died in the previous battle and those that remained were staying well away. The Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters had become too quiet for my liking.

“Too-ka,” Eve said, walking next to me.

“Yeah?”

She showed me the map—we were finally about to enter the witch's domain. The witch's spot of light and ours were almost on top of each other on the display now, overlapping a little.

“No turning back now, Eve.” The corners of my mouth curled into a smile. “Not like you'd want to, right?”

The bloodsport warrior stood there as if she were straight out of some dream.

Then Eve nodded at me, lost in thought. “Never crossed my mind.”

With that—we stepped into the witch's domain.

As we walked through the forest, Seras noticed something. “This is... A magical engraving, it seems.”

She pointed to a symbol carved into the base of a tree trunk, almost covered by weeds given how low to the ground it was.

Probably carved down that low to make it hard to detect.

Seras stared at it hard, trying to understand what it meant.

“Is it a trap? A trigger to set something off?” I asked.

“It does appear to be a trap, yes. Part of it has broken though, so I don't believe it will activate. It looks quite old.”

Old, huh.

“Don’t tell me this witch is already long dead or something, jeez. It’d be a shame to come all this way to find a mummy waiting for us.”

Seras looked over at me. “Sir Too-ka?”

“You look like you got a good night’s sleep.”

“Y-yes... All thanks to your Sleep skill, master...”

For just a moment, I saw the guilt in her eyes—couldn’t help but see it.

I have a good idea of why she feels guilty. But she hasn’t realized that I know yet. That’s fine—I’ll leave things as they are. There’s no reason for me to say anything, and it seems like she’s repenting in her own way. I bet she will come and talk to me about it of her own accord soon enough—that’s just the way she is. I’ll just continue to play the usual captain until then.

“There are no monsters around here at all, huh?”

“It might be the power of the boundary,” mumbled Seras, as if to herself.

So there is magic like that in this world, then.

“Boundary creation is a high-level technique. At present, I cannot say whether it is born of magic or of the power of the spirits.”

We continued on.

“What are those?” Eve called out—the first to notice. There were several stone pillars up ahead that looked deeply embedded in the ground. Their sizes were all slightly different, but around ten of them dotted the forest floor. There were carvings on each of them, glowing faintly.

“It appears that those carvings are still in working order. We should proceed with caution—”

Eve’s ears pricked up. “Seras. Those things... They’re already active.”

Eve drew her sword—both my arms were already outstretched toward the pillars.

“Paralyze.”

The light faded. The stone pillars had shifted somewhat, right before they were frozen in place.

Shapechangers? Some kind of transformation? Whatever there are, looks like they're here to keep out intruders.

The pillars had frozen halfway transformed into some sort of humanoid shape.

As expected—he who strikes first wins.

“So... I guess they're like attack golems, to ward against intruders,” I ventured

My skills worked on the stone statue in the Mils ruins, so I guessed they would work on these things too.

“Too-ka.” Eve gestured to the hammer fastened to my backpack—the one I had used to break apart the Ashint corpses.

She's asking if we should do the same to them?

“Nah. I mean, if they try to move on their own and end up breaking there's nothing we can do, but... I don't want to go around smashing stuff that might belong to the witch for no good reason.”

The stone pillars didn't struggle, perhaps instinctively realizing the terrible danger that awaited them if they did.

Even golems don't want to die. That, or they're following the witch's orders to stay still.

We continued on through the forest and came to a clearing bordering a lake. The dense, foreboding atmosphere of the forest vanished as we stepped out under open sky. The clearing looked to be flourishing—the trees were fresh and young, and even the air tasted cleaner.

Eve scanned the area. “I don't sense a single monster nearby,” she said with a mix of surprise and concern.

“We're truly in the witch's domain now.”

Seras stood on the shore of the oval-shaped lake, craning her neck to look down at the surface of the water.

“The bottom of the lake is sparkling...” she said.

I went to stand by her side. “Light from some mana source, you think?”

“That is likely, yes.”

The water was so clear, I could see the rocks all the way down at the bottom, but there were no fish in sight.

“Mana sparkles like that when it’s in the water?”

“In large enough quantities, yes. There must be a considerable amount for it to shine so brightly.” Still leaning forward, Seras turned her head to look at the massive trunk of a dead and withered tree. “This plentiful source of mana here, right next to that great dried-up tree. This was the last thing I expected to find.”

“Might mean the witch is using a huge amount of mana every day?” I suggested. Standing next to Seras, I scanned the lake shore and saw a decrepit little hut some distance away.

“Let’s go,” I called out to Eve and the others.

The hut wasn’t locked. I opened the door and carefully peered inside. It was surprisingly normal—exactly what I’d expected to see in a hut on a lake shore.

“I’ll search the inside. Seras, stand guard out here with Lis,” said Eve.

“Understood. Be careful,” replied Seras.

“Yep. Too-ka, could you keep a lookout in the doorway? I’ll call if I need you.”

I stretched one hand out and laid the other on the hilt of my shortsword.

“Gotcha—I’ll be ready.”

Eve started searching the room and found a ladder leading upward on one of the walls. She climbed up quickly and disappeared into the room above, but returned a moment later.

“Just an attic,” she said.

The house had two rooms, excluding the attic. I scanned over what I could see of them from my place next to the door. There wasn’t much furniture or many tools, and the few that were scattered around looked ancient. The fireplace hadn’t been used for a long time and the place was filled with dust.

It was clear nobody was living there. The hut hadn’t been used for a month at least.

“Too-ka, stay very quiet for a minute, will you?”

“Okay.”

Eve focused her hearing, tapping on the walls and floors with the palm of her hand. She stopped suddenly, focusing on the rug in the center of the room.

“There’s something down there.”

She pulled up the rug to reveal a hole beneath, about big enough for a hand to fit through, and a handle next to it.

I entered the room and stood next to Eve. One of Piggymaru’s tentacles emerged from within my robes and looked down with us at the handle.

“Squee?”

Eve gave me a questioning look, and I nodded back at her. She turned back to the handle—and pulled. The floor jumped up, and a staircase appeared before us, leading down into the darkness.

“Hmph... Not very original.”

“The witch can’t be that serious about keeping this a secret then, can she?”

Looks more like an entrance than a secret passage to me. No obvious traps so far either.

I called Seras and Lis inside and poured magic into my leather pouch until it began to glow faintly.

“I’ll go first.”



Partway down, the staircase curved into a spiral. When it ended, we were in a spacious cavern with a polished stone floor, ceiling, and walls. There were candlesticks stuck into the walls at regular intervals that seemed to use mana to produce their light.

“Is that thing a golem too...?”

There was a creature made of earth moving about happily, its back turned to us.

Is it repairing something over there?

I didn't use my skills on it, as the creature didn't even react to our presence.

"Sir Too-ka," Seras called, looking at the great door in front of us, which had a large crystal stuck into its base.

"I hope this thing opens with mana like they usually do..."

The golem didn't even turn to look at us as we passed by it to get to the door.

"Seems like we're safe to ignore that thing, but... Piggymaru, let me know if it makes any moves, okay?"

"Squee!"

"Right, then."

I placed my hand over the crystal and poured mana into it. It began to ripple, as if there was some liquid pulsating inside, and the mana level began to slowly rise. But the door consumed an insane amount—not even comparable to the door crystals in the Ruins of Disposal.

"Well, if there's one thing I have it's MP to spare."

The orb continued to fill until finally the opaque black crystal was now completely consumed with pale, trembling white light.

The door gave a click—and opened.

KASHIMA KOBATO

AFTER HER ENCOUNTER with the leopardman who had called herself Eve, Kashima Kobato continued her walk through the dark, gloomy forest. The sun was going down and the whole place was dark and unnerving. But she only felt a little afraid, because in front of her walked the Takao sisters.

"Um... I-I want to thank you again, Takao-san."

"Whoa! Are you always so polite? Don't be so formal, Kashima—you can just like use our names, y'know? Besides, it gets confusing because we're both called Takao." said Itsuki lightly. It was obvious from the tone of her voice that she was trying to cheer Kobato up.

“You’re amazing, really. We’re in a whole other world, and you both haven’t changed a bit.”

“People change, whether they’re sent off to other worlds or not. It might be triggered by something of course, but no matter where they’re placed those that can change will do so—and those that cannot, will not,” said Hijiri, walking behind Kobato.

“H-Hijiri-san...you’re amazing too.”

Amazing was all she could muster. Kobato hated how bad she was at expressing herself. She tried to form clever sentences in her head, but they all fell apart before they made it to her mouth.

I read all those novels, but when it comes to real conversation, I just can’t get the words out. I’m bad at talking to people in the real world. I’m trying to change, but maybe there are some things with roots too deep.

“Anyway, like, I kinda have a question for you, Kashima.”

Takao Itsuki has a question for me? What could it be?

“S-sure... What is it?”

“Why are you in Asagi’s group?”

“Eh?”

“I mean like you look like you’re more into the class rep’s scene, yeah?”

“Well, I—”

Kobato’s mind went back to that day, in the capital of Alion.



The first trial was to kill a monster, but Kobato just couldn’t bring herself to do it. Then Asagi whispered in her ear...

“Don’t worry, Pidgey-chan... Reliable old Asagi-san’ll help you out.”

In the end, Kobato didn’t have to kill her monster—its corpse rolled out in front of her, accompanied by a shout from Asagi.

“Nice work, Pidgey! Looks like you just freaked out and got a lucky hit on the thing! But hey, you passed didn’t ya! All’s well that ends

well. ♪”

Her voice was loud enough that everyone nearby heard. She then walked over and placed an elbow on Kobato’s shoulder.

“Got too much chest and too little brains don’tcha, Pidghey! Lemme spell it out for you,” Asagi whispered, her tone becoming kinder.

“Humanity has always survived by working together! But if we don’t all link hands and do our part, we’ll all just end up beating each other up! We’ve all gotta work together, y’see?”

Kobato’s legs were trembling—she felt as if she was tangled up, caught around the neck by a snake. She thought Ikusaba Asagi sounded terrifying that day, but she couldn’t say anything in response—couldn’t find the words.

“Kobato-san.” Asagi’s hand reached around from behind her back, toward her left breast. “Are you listening to what I’m sayin’?”



“I...I’m going to stay in Asagi-san’s group.”

Itsuki folded her arms behind her head.

“Personally, like, Asagi seems kinda unhinged to me, y’know.” she said nonchalantly.

Kobato suddenly realized how soaked she was—not from the rain, but from how much she was sweating. She knew just the feeling Itsuki was describing.

“I know.”

Itsuki looked back at her innocently.

“Really? You think so too? So like, what, does she have dirt on you or something?”

“No, that’s not it,” replied Kobato.



“Pidghey, hey, you wanna go join Ayaka’s group, dontcha?”

“Yes... Well, I did at first.”

“Oho?”

“But now, I mean... I owe you for helping me in the trial.”

“Whoa! So sensible! I’m real moved to hear that!”



Kobato wasn’t going to run from Asagi’s group.

After all...

“It might save Sogou-san someday.”

Itsuki’s eyes opened wide. “Eh?”

Kobato tried to smile but couldn’t.

“Asagi-san thinks I’m an idiot, you see... And well, I think she doesn’t have any friends she can really talk to, you know, to really say what’s on her mind.”

Asagi got along with most of the girls, and had a lot of friends, but no best friends. It had always been that way.

Kobato continued, “Asagi-san’s smart, so I think she’s really careful about who she talks about her feelings with. I’m sure she knows I’m scared of her, so... Well, um...I think she thinks I’ll never betray her.”

She’s different when she’s talking to me—talks about different things than with the other girls... Not just surface-level stuff, but deeper things.

Kobato felt she had a sense for subtle things like that.

“Keeping your feelings bottled up will only cause you stress,” Hijiri broke in. “Human beings aren’t made of strong enough stuff to live their whole lives wearing a mask of deceit. Usually the smarter a human is, the stronger their desire to reveal that intelligence to others becomes. To prove their superiority to others—they want to let it out.”

Itsuki furrowed her brow, a confused look on her face. “Wha? Aneki... So, like, whaddya mean?”

“Smart people want to brag to others about how smart they are.”

“Ah, I get it. You’re smart, Aneki, so... You, too?”

"I'm still speaking, am I not? I can hardly deny it."

"You too, huh."

"I am human, after all." Hijiri laughed a bit at that. "Well... The truly intelligent can suppress the tendency to brag somewhat, and can begin thinking in a whole different dimension."

"H-hey... Am I the kind of person you'd want to brag about?"

"I'm proud of you of course, you're my little sister."

"Heh heh. ♪"

I don't think she answered your question, Itsuki-san...

"But like Kashima? How's Asagi talkin' to you gonna help the class rep?"

"She'll tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"Someday, she'll tell me some important part of her plans. Or at least give me a hint. If she's trying to hurt Sogou-san or put her in danger... Then as someone close to Asagi-san, I can..." She placed a hand on her chest to calm herself down. "I can find Sogou-san and tell her."

Itsuki stopped.

"Kashima, you—"

"It's okay," Kobato interrupted. She swallowed, her throat dry. "Asagi-san would never expect that 'stupid Pidgey-chan' to be thinking about things like this."

Even if she does, she'll think I don't have the courage to do anything about it.

Asagi's right—I don't have the guts. Not yet, at least... That's why I have to become strong.

"We were right to come find you," said Hijiri suddenly.

Kobato remembered a question she'd been meaning to ask for a while now. "C-come to think of it... Why did you two come out here just to save someone like me?"

"Because Sogou-san needs you alive."

"M-me?"

“She’s so tiresome.”

“Eh?”

Hijiri placed her hand on the hilt of her sword, which hung in a scabbard at her side. “The Goddess sent out another group in secret. None of them spoke a word, so this is just speculation, but I believe their aim was to assassinate the girls in Sogou-san’s group.”

“...Eh?!”

“Sogou-san would be unable to save her valued comrades from dying, causing her great mental strain. That was the intent, I think.”

Kobato was shocked.

“B-but why would she do a thing like that?! The Goddess was the one who summoned us! I’ve been trying so hard for her sake, to defeat the Demon Empire and...to get back to our old world!”

“The Goddess only wants Sogou-san to be her obedient pawn. It’s proof of how much the S-class heroes mean to her. But first she intends to break Sogou mentally. Then she can brainwash her and build her back up anew.”

Itsuki looked as if she finally understood.

“Ah, I get it... That’s why they started freakin’ tailing us!”

She hadn’t even told her own sister?

“Your death, Kashima-san, would deal a great blow to Sogou-san. I can tell by watching you together.”

So that’s it... It sort of makes me happy to hear Hijiri-san say it like that...

“It is...concerning.” Hijiri chose her words carefully, speaking out into the darkness. “If Sogou-san breaks, I can easily predict what would come next.”

Hijiri was soaked by the rain, her clothes clung to her skin and accented the lines of her body. She was slim, but not frail—calm and sophisticated, standing there in the dark. In that moment, Kobato was more impressed by her than words could say.

“You said you were trying hard to get back to the old world, did you not?” Hijiri elegantly swept back a few strands of hair that had attached themselves to her cheek.

“Y-yes...”

“Even if we should manage to defeat this Demon Empire and earn the right to return...” The next words Takao Hijiri spoke were serene, insightful, and icy cold, “...I don’t trust the Goddess to let us return to our old world.”

“Hey, Pidgey, you’re back! I was worried about ya!”

The members of 2-C came out to see her return, Ikusaba Asagi at their head, who lunged at Kobato for a hug.

“So, like, hmm? Why’re the Takaos with ya?”

“I met them by chance in the forest, and they saved me.” answered Kobato.

“Hmph? Human after all, you two! Ehh...” She saw Sogou Ayaka running toward her.

“Kashima-san!”

“Ah, Sogou-san!”

Ayaka put both hands on her shoulders. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

Kobato could feel how worried she really was—it sent a happy warmth flushing to her cheeks.

“Yes, all thanks to the Takao sisters’ help.”

She chose not to use their first names so as not to let on that they had any grown closer—especially not to Asagi.

“I see, so the Takao sisters helped you...”

Ayaka looked over at them gratefully. After they’d returned from the forest, the sisters had given a short report to Nyantan—there was no sign that their disappearance had affected the other students. Nevertheless...

“I hope you’re aware you’ve wasted my valuable time with your careless disappearance.”

Kirihara Takuto... He’s actually talking to the twins!

Up until now, Kirihara had basically treated them as if they didn’t exist.

“Hmm... What’s up, Kirihara? You don’t usually come up and start anything with us,” responded Itsuki, her tone stand-offish as she put herself between him and her sister.

“Sogou’s likely to drop out.”

“Huh? What are you talking about? You aren’t like making any sense.”

“Meaning Takao Hijiri is the only other true S-class hero left... That is what I, Kirihara Takuto, am saying.”

“I don’t like you, and like, you ain’t makin’ any sense!”

“Will you two sisters bow down before me, or join the dropouts I wonder... Soon you will have to choose.”

Itsuki glared at him.

“You got maggots for brains or what, Kirihara?”

“Takao Itsuki, my name is too sweet for your lips. You’re simply howling as usual, clinging to your older sister’s coattails.”

“I ain’t gonna deny hanging on, but what’s your deal? You’ve been ignoring us for weeks, standing ’round wearing your emperor’s new clothes.”

Kirihara sighed deeply.

“I have simply become more aware of my true power. Do not make me repeat myself,” he continued. “You truly are the picture of a dumb girl with good grades.”

“You lose to me in the end of year tests like, all the time. Jeez!”

Kirihara cracked his neck.

“I’m more of a Renaissance man, you know? I’m not so foolish as to devote all my time to test taking.”

“R-renai... What?” Itsuki asked disbelievingly.

“In any case, Hijiri...you need to house-train your sister.” Kirihara reached toward Hijiri’s arm.

Itsuki brushed his hand away before it got too close. “Why’re you trying to touch her?”

Hijiri herself was silent, her expression unchanging as she looked at Kirihara, studying him.

“I had planned to hold back—out of compassion, you see.” He sighed and brushed back his hair. “If I were to show you the true difference in our strength—someone would get hurt...”

“Then do it,” said Itsuki.

Silence, as if time itself had stopped, and then...

“Dragonic—”

“Lightning—”

“All right, settle down! That’s enough o’ that, you brats!” shouted Abis, eldest sister of the Four Holy Elders. Nyantan was moving to intercept them both too. “Cause any more freakin’ trouble, and I’ll smash you up like I did that lil’ idiot Oyamada, you hear?! So, what’s it gonna be?!”

Kobato saw Oyamada Shougo standing behind her, with a visible bruise on his cheek, staring daggers at Abis. She was likely the reason he wasn’t by Kiri-hara’s side in the first place.

Kobato tried to catch her breath.

She didn’t even hesitate to jump in between them... The Four Holy Elders are amazing...

“Just be happy you escaped death...” Kiri-hara said as he backed down first, sighing and rubbing the back of his neck. “All these mediocre-spec do-gooders stepping out of line are making the low-spec idiots get all arrogant. They misunderstand their place in the hierarchy. Even in this other world, the strong are constantly held back by ignorant, incapable fools grasping at their heels. This is the solitude that comes with being made from the stuff of kings...”

Itsuki backed off as well, muttering. “...Started losing your mind ever since you came here, Kiri-hara.”

“Thank you, Itsuki, for helping me,” Hijiri said, finally opening her mouth.

“Hmph. There’s no reason you should lower yourself to fight a guy like that, Aneki.”

“Oh, man, looks like everybody’s back!” It was Agit, eldest brother of the Four Holy Elder siblings. He was on horseback, coming in from the direction of the outskirts, rather than the center of the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters. “Sorry, but it looks like we’re going to be

heading out before sunrise.”

Agit looked over at Nyantan, who nodded back curtly. The group of girls behind her squealed in chorus to see him approach.

“OMG! Agit-san! ♪”

“W-wait a sec?! He’s like totally a knight on horseback?! A white horse too!”

“He’s the real thing! A white knight in shining armor!”

“He’s pulling it off! Like, seriously pulling it off! I totally see him as a knight!”

“It’s so tragic... To be unable to capture his beautiful form and share it on R@IN!”

Agit chuckled and turned to look toward Alion. “Looks like we’re headed home, and it’s nothing to do with that monster stampede.”

“What happened?” asked Kirihara, without turning his head to look at him.

“They sent a fast messenger to the base we set up on the outskirts of this land,” he continued. “The Demon Empire isn’t waiting any longer—they’re finally heading south in force.”

NYANTAN KIKIPAT

NYANTAN KIKIPAT FINISHED READING her report to the Goddess.

“As was somewhat expected, the expedition to the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters appears to have raised the standard of our heroes successfully. Minus two casualties who didn’t much matter anyway—all is well. ♪”

The Goddess sat in her private quarters in the capital, curling her long hair around her finger as Nyantan stood before her.

“Growth doesn’t usually come quite this easily, but they’re leveling up, aren’t they? Feeling themselves grow, witnessing their power increase each time they kill a new golden-eyed monster. Before long, they will begin to feel pleasure at watching their level increase. Oho ho, perhaps humans were born to be slaves to such numbers.”

She tossed the report down on her desk.

“But Nyantan, it’s strange that all of Sogou’s precious companions are still with us, wouldn’t you agree? I wonder why? It puzzles me ever so much, you see.”

“It seems someone got in the way.”

“You mean you haven’t even troubled yourself to determine who? Oh, what am I saying? You’re so talented, Nyantan, I’m sorry I ever doubted you.”

“My apologies. I’m still not aware of who interfered with the operation.”

“Eh? Really?! Taking your life a little bit for granted, are you not?”

“I beg your pardon, Goddess?”

“I see, I see... You’re covering for someone, then?”

“There’s no one I would cover for.”

“Ahem, now this is quite difficult to ask, but that report from Ulza on the Ashint matter was delayed, wasn’t it?”

“I apologize for the delay in delivering that report.”

“You’re so capable, and yet... You were late.”

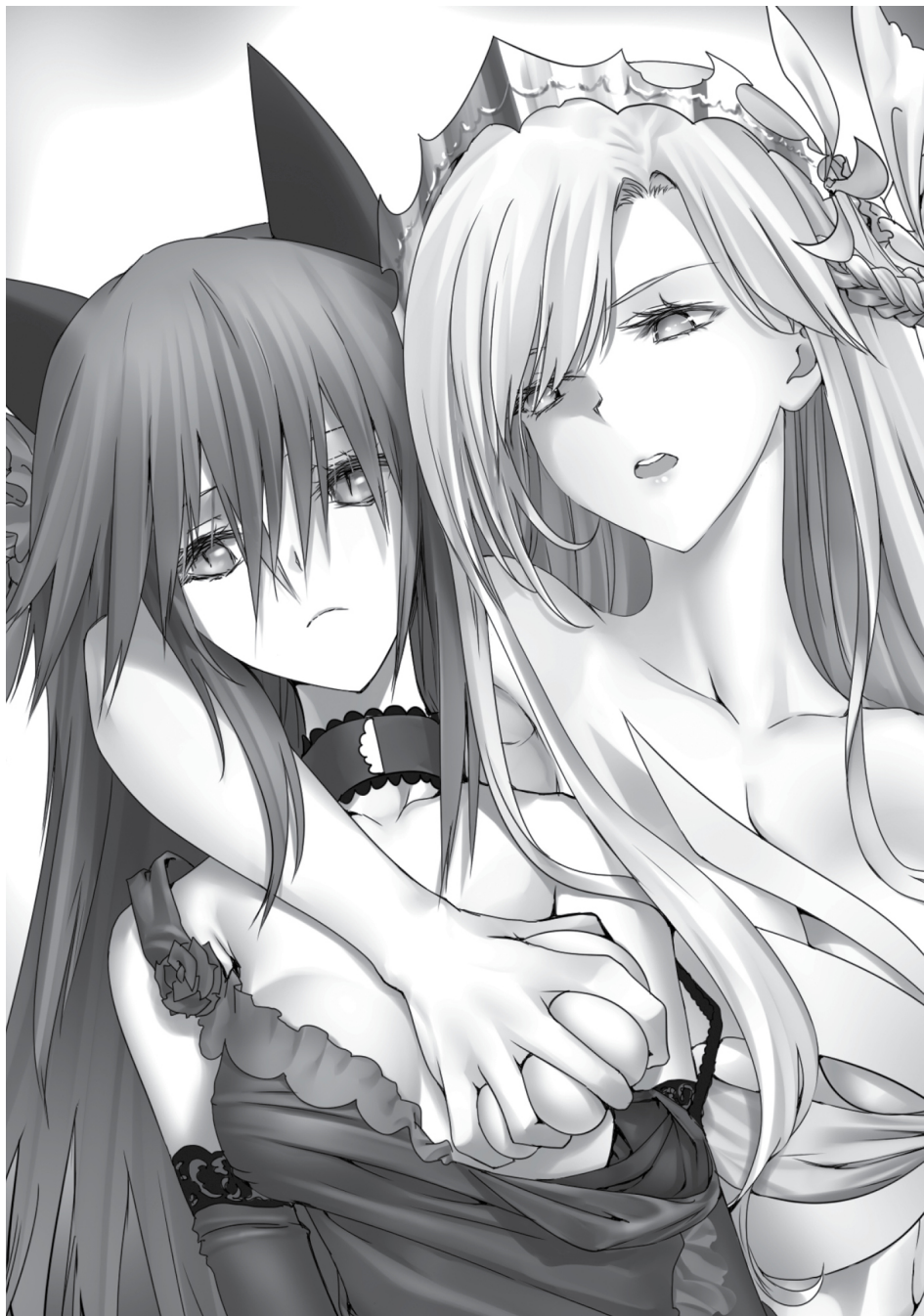
The Goddess stood up from her chair, and circled round until she was at Nyantan’s back.

“Plotting something, perhaps? Contacting Ashint, getting up to no good with the murderer of the ‘Strongest Man in the World,’ are we...? Oho ho ho, but of course not.”

The Goddess’ hands wrapped around Nyantan’s hips, stroking over her stomach. “I’m incorrect, aren’t I?”

“Yes.”

The Goddess began feeling her all over, as if looking for something Nyantan was hiding.



“What of the Takao sisters?” Vicius asked.

Part of the reason Nyantan had been assigned to their training was to watch over them, as the Goddess decided how to handle the sisters in the long run.

The Goddess continued, “I’ve allowed them freedom, have I not? They aren’t using their liberty to do anything that might upset me, are they? Oh my... It worries me so just to have to ask. I’ll take some deep breaths before you answer, shall I?”

“Nothing that I have noticed. They are growing stronger by the day.”

“And yet recently they questioned me...almost defiantly. As if they suspect me of bullying Sogou-san or something!”

“I believe the question was whether the heroes could be confident in you treating them all equally, without distinction, Goddess.”

“And that is how Hijiri intended it?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm, but she sounded so aggressive... I was terrified, you know!” The goddess feigned a sob. “Ah, you aren’t lying to me, are you?”

“Of course not.”

The Goddess let the statement hang in the air, unanswered. She occasionally used silence like this, interrogating without words, in order to read people.

“I see.”

Nyantan wasn’t sure how to interpret that. The Goddess’ hands stopped moving.

“Ahem, Nyantan... If things get too hard, you can always betray me, you know? Don’t push yourself too hard on my account. I won’t take you to task over it. I’ll just dispose of you.”

“I would never betray you, Goddess Vicius.”

“Then your delayed report was a truly a simple mistake? With the lives of your cute little sisters on the line? I’m amazed you could be so careless.”

“With all the recent missions, I haven’t been able to perform my

duties properly. I apologize that the mission to assassinate Ayaka Sogou's group members was unsuccessful."

"Oho ho ho... Ever so dutiful, aren't you. Am I being too strict with you, perhaps?"

"No, you are not."

The Goddess laid a hand on Nyantan's face, her fingers finding their way into her mouth.

"Someone must chide those who do not show that they can grow. I have the courage to be hated, you see. Spare me the modern lecturing that it's more lenient to just forgive and forget. Nobody can grow without getting hurt, that is simply how this world is made... Oh, how cruel humans can be. Now please, do try your best out there."

"I will try."

Nyantan knew the Goddess had never been on the receiving end of pain like that. She shut off her senses and let her eyes wander. They landed on the large frame of a painting covered in cloth, which she had never seen before.

The Goddess noticed her gaze.

"What's that, you wonder?" She walked over and lifted the cloth, revealing the painting of a golden-haired high elf beneath. "A painting of Seras Ashrain, head to toe."

"A gift from the Bakoss Empire. Now that the 'Strongest Man in the World' is lost to us, I desire stronger protectors. Though, of course, I would have much preferred the real thing to a painting of her."

The Goddess went on to explain that it was painted by one of the court artists, using the subject herself as a model, and was a treasured possession of the Holy Emperor of Neah himself. After the fall of Neah, the Bakoss Empire took many of their treasures, but this painting had remained with the emperor until his death.

"The Emperor was said to have only rarely allowed outside artists to capture her in person. But he commissioned her portraits frequently and was rumored to have many paintings of her in his personal collection. Depictions of her are rather valuable, and of course, there are countless forgeries in circulation. Oh, I hear even the bounty posters of her are being stolen from mercenary guild noticeboards, did you know? What deviant little minds these humans possess..."

The Princess Knight, Seras Ashrain, was believed to be dead—although her corpse had never been found.

“Oh, now I remember what I wanted to say! Nobles across the continent have been trading in her old possessions, you see? Ever since the theories began popping up about her death, items such as those have positively shot up in value.”

The things have value just because they were used by Seras Ashrain? How strange.

“And well, if they’re worth something then there might just be a great many ways to use those items...should I be able to get my hands on them.”

Using them—they’re all disposable to her. The Disciples of Vicius are no different—we’re all just pawns in her divine game.

“By lending them out for favors, for example.” There was no reluctance in the Goddess’ voice. “I’m so happy to be able to speak frankly with you. Tough decision after tough decision... My heart cries out with sadness! If you remember nothing else, Nyantan, remember this, now and always: remember to have the courage to be hated.”

Nyantan accompanied the Goddess from Alion to the Kingdom of Magnar and the White Citadel of Protection along with the Sixth Order of Knights. The reason was plain—the Demon Empire’s forces were finally moving south, and representatives from all nations were gathering in northern Magnar once more.

In the White Citadel of Protection—the Conclave of the Wolves—representatives had been arguing furiously now for almost half the day. The room had grown hot and stuffy.

But everything does seem to be proceeding as the Goddess intends.

“Open a window, would you, Curia?” the Queen of Yonato said, her elbow on the table and her head in her hand. She looked exhausted. The woman behind her looked to the Goddess and White Wolf King for assent.

“May I?”

The White Wolf King nodded silently, and the Goddess waved her

hand in agreement.

Curia Guilstein, the Holy Priest of Yonato, opened the window. A refreshing gust of air blew into the room and danced lightly through the Goddess' long blonde hair.

The debate was over for the moment—they had run out of ideas.

I'm sure each nation still has some tricks up their sleeves, though.

An official entered the room and walked straight to the White Wolf King's side to whisper in his ear. When the man had left, the king folded his arms and spoke.

"They've slowed down. It's as we expected: they're not coming south in search of a battle just yet."

Deep wrinkles formed on his brow as he closed his eyes tightly, visualizing a map of the northern reaches.

"Wh-what do you mean?" asked the Monster Slayer King impatiently.

The White Wolf King squinted at him.

"This neatly planned march they've been on, spreading west, south and east... They're going to come at us on three fronts at once."

The Goddess sunk deeply into her chair and appeared vexed.

"They do appear to be spreading their forces wide, yes," she said. "From what I can see. They don't intend to focus their attacks in any one location. Attempting to force us to divide our strength, perhaps?"

"Who knows what those demons are thinking," said the White Wolf King.

The Goddess stared off absently at the wall.

"The army they've sent south. It could break off and meet up with their forces in the east or west at some point? Meaning the southern army could simply be to reinforce whichever flank proves to be more difficult?"

"That, or they're intending to go through the White Citadel of Protection and plunge headlong into the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters," suggested the White Wolf King.

"No, I doubt that." The Monster Slayer King lightly rebuffed him.

"You are probably correct. There's a surprising lack of

communication and comradeship between the older monsters and the new source of evil. Newer generation monsters have often been seen fighting with the old.”

The White Wolf King sighed loudly.

Then he continued, “But if they’re coming at us on three fronts, we’re going to have to argue about troop placement now, aren’t we. Mind if I leave that to you, Vicius?”

The Goddess smiled at him. “Of course.”

Just then, a man entered the room. He was a fiercely handsome, courageous-looking youth. Nyantan knew him—the top general of the Empire of Mira, and next in line to the throne—the Wildly Beautiful Emperor’s elder brother. He handed a piece of paper to his younger brother, and they spoke briefly together in whispers. After a time, he left, and the emperor glanced at the paper once more before throwing it down on the table in front of him.

“My empire’s new analysis of the enemy’s strength. The sheer number is quite out of the ordinary. We would also do well to raise our expectations of the abilities of each individual monster, I believe.”

The Goddess quickly glanced over the report.

“I see. So that is how the Demon Empire wants to play it.”

The rest of the representatives leaned forward in their seats one by one to inspect the report in the center. The Monster Slayer King’s eyes opened wide in terror.

“Wh-what is the meaning of this?!” he cried.

“The enemy forces are several times larger than the last source of evil produced, it appears.” noted the Goddess, looking grave for once.

“And now the strength of the Black Dragon Knights is gone. Whoever it was that defeated them, be it Ashint or some other group, they have a lot to answer for,” said the Monster Slayer King as he stood with both hands on the table, stricken with panic. “They’re attacking from three directions because they know they have the numbers to overwhelm us! Th-this horde... They’re going to break through, no matter where they invade! What do we do? We’re doomed!”

The Queen of Yonato wiped away the sweat running down her cheek. “The fierce advance we now face... How in heavens are we to repel it?”

The White Wolf King looked down at the report, furrowing his brow. “It’s clear none of us can handle any of these fronts with our own forces. My Kingdom will be turned into a battlefield... Even if we do claim victory, my nation must prepare for a long road to recovery.”

He studied the Goddess carefully, narrowing his eyes. “I don’t think this is everything they have—not yet. But even now, we’ve all lost the luxury of holding any strength back in reserve. This battle to come...we must attack in unison and bring our full force to the table! If not—”

“—you will all be annihilated,” The Goddess finished his sentence, putting the reality of the situation into words.

TAKAO ITSUKI

AFTER HEARING NEWS of the Demon Empire’s advance, the heroes returned to the capital, and to the accommodations the Goddess had provided for them. Takao Itsuki was in her big sister’s room.

The S-class heroes’ rooms were lavish—like suite rooms in expensive hotels. The A-class rooms weren’t shabby by any means, but whenever Itsuki visited her sister, she couldn’t help but sense the gap that lay between them. She was somewhat proud to see her sister being treated so well.

“Aneki, what’s that you’re reading?”

Takao Hijiri was sitting elegantly in a chair, reading what looked like a letter.

“A certain intel report—from a certain someone,” she replied.

“...You’ve got spies, Aneki?”

“Perhaps so,” she said, a smile forming on her rose-colored lips.

The others thought of Itsuki and Hijiri as a duo—always together—but that wasn’t true. Hijiri would sometimes sneak off on her own, and there were times Itsuki went to look in on her and found her missing.

Itsuki never mentioned her sister’s mysterious disappearances to anyone else or ask any questions when Hijiri returned.

Hijiri's always right. Even if, on the one-in-ten-thousand chance that she's wrong, I'll still follow her.

“Hey, like, are we gonna jump straight to the boss battle with the Demon Empire, y’think?”

“Judging by the preparations going on in the castle and outside these walls, I believe a large battle is to come, yes. Perhaps you are not wrong to call it a boss battle. Looking at the history of these conflicts, the first big engagement has tended to affect the course of the war as a whole.”

“So, it’s like a big deal, but we’re still just throwin’ punches for now huh? Man, Aneki...you’re real into studying. You’ve been like studying history?”

“I discovered something quite interesting when reading through some old records.”

Itsuki wondered what she was getting at. “So, like, that letter thing is a document from a past battle or somethin’?”

We might be about to really go into battle against this source of all evil things. She's gathering intel on how to fight it?

“Perhaps it is,” said Hijiri, beckoning her over.

Itsuki looked puzzled, but walked over to stand by her sister’s side and leaned over her shoulder. Her sister was sitting so close now, right next to her ear. Itsuki’s face was getting hotter.

It's strange, but my heartbeat still rises so much just being next to her. Kinda embarrassing to look her in the eyes when we're this close. C'mon, it ain't like you're some sweet maiden in love, Itsuki... Get a hold of yourself.

How many years has it been?

On some level, she had already given up trying to get over feeling that way.

“...So, what’s this secret intel?” asked Itsuki, lowering her voice.

She probably called me over close because she doesn't want anyone else to hear this.

Itsuki didn’t sense anyone listening in outside their door, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

“I’m in the loop, you see,” Hijiri said quietly.

“In the loop?”

“I’m having some of the reports the Goddess receives passed on to me.”

Itsuki couldn’t conceal her surprise. “Y-you sure that’s like, a good idea?”

“With the Demon Empire’s rise, the Goddess has been receiving a great number of letters and reports from the other countries, and is unable to check all of them over personally, or so it seems. She’s currently relying on some of her trusted subordinates to pass the information to her orally instead.”

Meaning Aneki is getting reports from whoever’s handling the Goddess’ letters... Huh. But if they’re looking over reports like those, it must be someone the Goddess like really trusts, right?

“You sure you can trust the guy that’s giving you those reports? I mean like, this is you we’re talking about... So, I’m not worried, it’s just...”

“I cannot say that I can trust this person completely, no. I have not built up a rapport with them as I have with you, my sister.”

Itsuki grinned happily, scratching her head.

“Well, supposing they do betray me...I shall cross that bridge when I come to it,” Hijiri said bluntly, moving on to the next document.

She’s taking such a huge risk but doesn’t seem nervous at all. Incredible, just like always.

Itsuki continued to watch her sister read for a while longer, never getting tired of just looking at her. Hijiri’s eyes stopped on something—staring quite intently at the document in her hands.

“What is it, Aneki...?”

“This report is from Ulza,” she said, her fingers stroking her shapely chin.

“What’s it say?” asked Itsuki, peeking over at it.

“It’s a report on the inspection of a so-called underground tomb in the southern reaches. Specifically, the Ruins of Disposal.”

“The Ruins of Disposal, huh? Like, wasn’t that guy sent down there?”

“Yes. It appears that a party is sent out at regular intervals to inspect the ruin for any changes. If anyone has entered or exited the ruins, the crystal by the door will change colors.”

“But like, nobody’s ever escaped the Ruins of Disposal, yeah?”

“The most recent inspection detailed no irregularities.”

“So, what’s the deal?”

“The most recent inspection was incorrect.”

“Eh? Like, what do you mean?”

“The head of the scouting party reported no irregularities because he believed the crystal was defective. Their reports are only submitted once every six months—unless there is some change. In that case they must be handed in immediately.”

“Jeez, do your job guys...”

“Apparently, sending documents to a foreign nation like Alion is quite the difficult process. The leader of the scouting team is likely putting off submitting his report until the regular six-month deadline comes around. He believes that it’s a non-issue. Putting a lid on it and pretending one never saw anything to begin with is a common behavior.”

“But like, if the boss guy is putting it off, then who wrote that report you’re reading?”

“An overly sincere member of the scouting party, it seems. He sent it to the Goddess in secret, along with a rather scathing report detailing his dissatisfaction with the lazy work his party has been doing as of late.”

“So, like, that one serious guy is ratting all the rest of them out? Aneki, wait a minute. Nobody escapes from the Ruins of Disposal, right? But, like, if there’s an irregularity with the crystal then... I dunno... maybe?”

“Someone might have survived that place, yes.”

“There mighta been others sent down there. I mean, not like it’s a place just for E-class heroes with worthless skills like him, right?” Itsuki placed a finger to her lips and glanced at her sister questioningly.

“Aneki, what do you think?”



“Personally, based on the information I have collected about the place, I cannot imagine that he survived. Yet...” Hijiri looked down at the report, trying to work out the two possibilities suggested within. “None of us have seen his corpse, meaning the possibility cannot be entirely dismissed, even if the chances are slim.”

The twin sisters’ eyes met, and Itsuki gave voice to the thought in both their heads.

“Mimori Touka may still be alive.”

Epilogue

IT WAS AS IF we had stepped into another dimension. The ceiling was impossibly high, simply impossible.

Eve stared up in amazement. “We’re underground, but...I can see the sky?”

“Amazing...” Lis was looking around in awe too.

“The witch’s power, I guess. Or...she could’ve linked that door to some new location,” I suggested.

There are thousands of stories in the old world. A setting like this makes sense for a powerful witch like the one we’ve come to meet. These tricks are surprising, but it makes sense that they’re here. I should be prepared for anything.

I licked my finger and held it up.

“There’s a wind.” I paused a moment. “And it’s changing direction—it isn’t fixed.”

There’s a breeze down here underground—not to mention these flourishing weeds and flowers.

“Are we on the surface?” asked Eve, still unable to hide her astonishment.

“No, look over there.”

I pointed ahead to the twisted roots of some great tree in front of us. They stretched down from the thick clouds that covered the sky above, then down again into the earth below.

We’re still underground—there’s the proof. Is that sky just a trick? An illusion, like Seras’s light magic?

“Are those the roots of the withered tree we saw...?” asked Seras.

“Seems likely.”

“They reach all the way down here into the earth...”

That lake with the huge amount of mana at the bottom... The tree up there is dying, but its roots are still alive? The roots of this old sacred tree might still be producing mana. The witch is gathering that somehow. I get it

now, she has this infinite spring of mana. Not a bad place for a witch to live.

There were tunnels carved into the roots that looked as if they'd been made by human hands, and staircases leading up to them. In the higher reaches I could see balconies among the roots.

"Too-ka," Eve said.

"Yeah, I see it."

Somebody had just emerged from a door on one of the balconies above. I could clearly make her out from the lights dotted around the cave. Earrings accented her long ears—her skin was tanned and her figure womanly. Her eyes were a bluish-purple, and cold. Her hair was jet black, hanging down as far as her waist. She was wearing a qipao-like outfit, cloth hanging in the front with slits on either side. But there was something Western about it, too.

The Forbidden Witch.

Pretty revealing outfit...but I guess she doesn't have to worry about prying eyes down here.

She stared down at us with a finely decorated staff in her hand, her expression pure ice. She observed us calmly for a moment, before finally opening her shapely mouth to speak.

"※Kk,mk■△hjn*gkt◆h."

"...What?"

She doesn't speak our language? That can't be. She's met with members of Eve's tribe before. The witch who learned so much and became the Forbidden One—that's how people speak of her. She must be able to speak the common language of this world.

"sW...■hbt※t?" said Seras.

The witch pounded the ground with her staff, then spoke again. "I hadn't imagined one of you might actually speak the ancient tongue."

Seras stepped forward. "Was that some kind of test?"

"Yeah. I thought I'd see what sort had wandered in here."

I observed the witch closely. Even as she spoke to Seras, she was looking directly at me.

"Are you—"

"Knock that off." The witch interrupted Seras's question before she

could even finish. “Don’t ask for what you already know.”

The witch rebuked Seras but didn’t sound angry or upset.

I’m surprised to hear her talk like that—she almost sounds like a little girl. Her face and body are that of a beautiful woman, so my first impression was wrong. There’s no denying that.

The witch smartly twisted her hips.

“You don’t need to ask me every little thing, okay?”

The witch spun her staff around in her hands, like a high schooler twirling a pen.

“First, my name...I am Erika Anaorbael,” said the witch, puffing out her chest with a look of self-importance. “And I am the Forbidden Witch you seek.”



Afterword

I'VE FOUND I CAN'T LIVE without my earplugs of late—this is Kaoru Shinozaki.

In this volume we've finally ventured into the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters. Even in that dangerous place, we've seen moments of humor and watched the characters' relationships begin to change. (By the way, maybe because our main character Tooka is always wearing his fly mask, I find myself looking at pictures of flies and growing a little fond of them of late... I'm not sure if this is a good or bad thing yet.)

Acknowledgments—this book has largely only come to print thanks to my editor, O-sama. Thank you to KWKM-sama for all the amazing illustrations and designs in this fourth volume. Thanks to all the drawings we've gotten in the print books, my appreciation for Seras has increased several-fold.

Thank you to all the readers of the web version for all your supportive comments.

Thank you for continuing to read on after the third volume. I'm honored you have chosen to keep reading my work.

Well, then, I hope we meet again in the next book, where the Demon Empire finally makes its move!

—Kaoru Shinozaki



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